

Ease of Credence by vasillier

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Language: English

Characters: Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Original Characters, Original Child Character(s), Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-06-20

Updated: 2021-06-20

Packaged: 2022-03-31 13:53:50

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Chapters: 8

Words: 26,258

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Alice Darrow, a young girl born and raised in Hawkins, Indiana, has to find her footing in the world of motherhood, high school, and monsters. When Will Byers, friend of Alice and son of her mother's high school best friend, goes missing, her world expands far beyond what our dimension entails. Alice must learn to adapt to her new experiences to keep her siblings and her young friends safe from horrors far off from even their own imaginations.

1. Something Wicked

It's November 6th, 1983 and Alice Darrow was studying well into the late hours of the night. After putting her younger siblings to bed an hour ago, she was already deep into the notes she had scrawled mercilessly into her chemistry notebook during class that morning. Her eyelids felt heavy as she continued to look over her notebooks, attempting to retain as much information as she could before the next morning came.

She had considered pulling an all-nighter to prepare for Kaminski's test but decided against it after realizing that she had to make breakfast for the twins tomorrow. Operating anything but a microwave while running on fumes was not a good idea, even though she knew the twins would rather have cereal than the eggs and bacon that she made them every morning.

Papers were strewn across the, already, crowded kitchen table and multiple open soda cans were thrown around the general vicinity. She began to go back through her notes and highlight the things she knew she would forget when the only working light in the kitchen began to flicker. She swore under her breath, when the light suddenly stopped flickering and continued radiating brightly in the dark kitchen. She sighed, relieved that she wouldn't have to buy a new bulb, and continued on with her studying. Sometime between one and two, she fell asleep atop the pile of notes.

Alice woke up with the sun the next morning. Her eyes slowly fluttered open just as the light began to peek through the kitchen window, creating a ladder of light on the wall behind her. She lethargically stood up, heading throughout the house to get ready before the twins woke up.

After she finished her morning routine, she began to make breakfast. Soon enough, the house smelled of delicious bacon, surrounded by a symphony of sizzles from the frying pan. And, just like that, the twins emerged from their bedroom like small goblins, still rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

"Good morning, sweethearts," she said, without turning her attention

from the hot pan in front of her.

“Morning, Aly,” both of them answered simultaneously.

Alice set down their plates in front of them with a slight clunk as it hit the wooden table. For six year olds, they were surprisingly good-natured. Especially given the fact that Alice was their only “parent.” She had done a good job thus far, though she had a lot of help from Joyce Byers.

Joyce and Jillian, Alice’s mother, were high school best friends and when Jill decided to skip town, she gave Joyce her kids. Joyce, already having two kids of her own, wasn’t able to juggle three more kids out of the blue, not to mention twins, who were barely toddlers at the time. So Alice grew up very fast. She overtook the household, got a job at 13, and took care of herself and the twins. Jill still sent checks every now and again, but they never had a return address.

The phone rang from its spot on the wall and the twins both shot up from their seats to attempt to get it first. The two of them ran dramatically towards the phone on the wall and a large boom sounded throughout the house as Tommy pushed his sister aside to get there first. Tommy began to jump up and down triumphantly but Lucy stole it out of his hands anyway.

“Hi! I’m Lucy,” the child said happily, sticking her tongue out at Tommy who was already sulking. Lucy held the phone out to her sister, “It’s Auntie Joyce.”

“Hey, mama, what’s up?” Alice answered the phone.

“Hey, sweetheart. I know you said you weren’t able to pick Will up from Mike’s last night, but you didn’t happen to see him, right?” Alice could tell that Joyce was shaken up. She could hear the rustling of the wire on the other side of the line.

“No, sorry. I haven’t seen him since I picked him up from school on Friday. Did he not come home last night?” Alice questioned, speaking quietly as to not scare the twins.

“Oh, okay. I’m sure he just left early and we didn’t see him.” Joyce

sputtered out. Alice heard the disappointment in her voice when she spoke.

“I’ll let you know if I see him, okay? I have to get the twins off to school, but I’ll stop by tonight?” Alice tried to console the mother. Joyce appreciated the gesture more than she could say.

“I’ll see you then, sweetie. Have a good day at school. Tell Tommy and Lucy to be good.” Before Joyce could hang up, Alice shouted to the kids who were now fighting over “the good fork” in the kitchen.

“What do we say to Auntie Joyce?”

Small, mighty voices rang out from the next room. “We love you, Auntie Joyce!”

The morning was quite hectic following the phone call with Joyce. Tommy couldn’t find his shoe--it ended up being in his school bag. Lucy started crying because her boyfriend broke up with her yesterday and immediately got with Suzie. She felt better after Alice said that Suzie is probably grody and that her ex-boyfriend is just an airhead. Even with everything going on, everyone made it to school on time. Alice even had enough time, after dropping off the twins, to stop by the middle school and check up on the boys.

The boys consisted of Mike Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, and Will Byers AKA the coolest dudes in Hawkins middle school.

As she walked through the small campus, among the small children, Alice finally laid eyes on the boys as they walked their bikes to the bike rack. Though she noticed that Will was missing from the group. She watched as a boy came up to them with what looked like his cronies. Alice picked up speed and began to saunter over to them, ready and able to kick some little slimeball’s teeth in.

“Who do you think would make more money in a freak show, huh?” The boy said, walking over to Lucas. Before he could answer his own question, Alice stepped in between them.

“Freak show? I didn’t know there was a freak show in town! I

should've known. That mondo zit on your nose makes me think that you'd be the two-headed man, right? Or maybe the two-headed boy? Cause it seems like mama's little baby still hasn't grown one chest hair."

"Lucas has a chest hair!" Dustin chirped.

"I have several!" Mike added.

"Now step off, barf bag, before I call your mom." Alice said, watching the little twerp walk away from the scene of his own murder. Dramatically, she brushed off her shoulders and cracked her knuckles. "No one messes with mama. How are you dweebs doing? Where's Will?"

"We don't know. We think he just went to class early again." Lucas explained.

"That would make sense. He's always paranoid about old Gursky's pop quizzes," Alice agreed. "Well, let me know if he's not. I'll be on the supercomm if you need anything."

"For sure. Thanks, by the way." Mike said timidly.

"It was no problem," she said, messing up his hair, "Have a good day at school, weirdos!" She called before trudging her way towards Hawkins high school.

On top of everything that went on in her life, Alice was a smart girl. Her cumulative GPA, thus far, was just above a 3.8 and she still maintained the reputation of being the nicest girl that anyone could have met.

"How's it going, bunny?" She was greeted by the voice of her best friend, the king of Hawkins High himself, Steve Harrington.

"It's going fine, ducky. How are you?"

Steve and Alice have been best friends since diapers, with their nicknames for each other stemming from that time in their lives. Their parents were friends in high school and had playdates together while the kids were growing up. Alice's mom gave Steve a stuffed

duckling and Steve's mom gave Alice a stuffed bunny. The nicknames stuck and they had been calling each other that ever since.

"I am wonderful. I'm meeting the most beautiful girl before class today and I'm stoked!" Steve was awestruck by beautiful girls. He said that same sentence last month when he was talking about Laurie but she didn't want to steal his thunder. Alice didn't realize that she had spaced out.

"Hey, are you sure that you're alright?" Steve waved his hand in front of Alice's face.

"What? Oh, yeah. I'm just--I'm nervous about Kaminski's test." She said, not really lying.

Steve seemed audibly confused by the fact that Alice, the most brilliant person he knows, is actually worried about a test.

"You and I both know that you have no reason to be scared about a test. You're a genius, remember?" Alice scoffed. She closed her locker a little louder than she intended and Steve jumped back. "You're going to be fine, bunny." He put his hand on her shoulder and smiled.

"I'll see you later, Steve." She smiled back, walking towards her first class of the day.

Seven hours and eight classes later and Alice was ready to go home. Sure, her home life wasn't the best, but high school was exhausting. She had to uphold her reputation of being the perfect little girl next door, otherwise she wouldn't be able to survive in the Hawkins High food chain. She stumbled haphazardly to her car with a tower of textbooks about to topple over in her arms.

She drove cautiously over to the elementary school, feeling a wave of relief rush over her as she saw the twins bound toward her happily. She had no reason to worry, really. It was just, with Will still currently MIA, she was aware of the fact that there may be a kidnapper or a psychopath or someone that would want to hurt them.

"Hello, Aly!" Tommy said, dragging out the vowels in a sing-songy

manner.

“Hi there, lovelies. I have a surprise for you guys! We’re going to go visit Auntie Joyce!”

The twins cheered enthusiastically, with Lucy accidentally dumping out the contents of her backpack on the floor of the car.

“Lucy Rose, you better pick that up right now.” Alice said, putting on a stern voice.

“I’m doing it, I’m doing it.” Lucy replied with a sassy tone.

The car ride over to the Byers’ home consisted of Alice, accompanied by a small chorus of the twins, singing every word to the song “I Love Rock ‘N’ Roll” by Joan Jett & The Blackhearts.

The feelings changed when the three of them finally arrived at the Byers’. Cop cars were scattered around the yard like toys that a child had forgotten to pick up. Chief Hopper’s truck stood at the front of the battalion, like the fearless leader that he was.

“Hold my hands, please.” Alice said sweetly to the kids after getting them out of the car.

“Why are the cops here, Aly?” Tommy said inquisitively.

She stopped dead in her tracks. She hadn’t told the twins about Will yet because she thought he would show up at school or at someone’s house. She didn’t think it was that serious. Alice crept toward the open front door and slowly stepped inside the crowded home, both twins glued tightly to her side. Hopper was the first one to notice them.

“Alice,” he said quietly, “They really shouldn’t be here right now.” Alice nodded. The adults were talking. She knelt down to eye-level with the twins and spoke to them, attempting to make it seem like there wasn’t anything too serious going on.

“Hey, you guys remember the train set that Jonathan has in his room?” They nodded excitedly, already running away excitedly before she could finish speaking with them.

The tension that stood stagnant in the living room was thick enough to cut. Hopper had found Will's bike out by Cornwallis and Kerley but Will wasn't with it. Hopper was determined to send out another search party after he looked in the shed for any clues on Will's whereabouts. Whatever he had seen--or not seen--had tipped him off greatly.

Alice wanted to assist in the search party, but she had her own kids to look after.

"How are you holding up, Jonny?" Alice asked, sitting down next to him on the sofa. Jonathan's eyes were red, like he had been crying recently. He looked at her and sighed.

"I just feel so stupid, you know? If I had just checked to see if he was in his room after I came home last night, we could've started earlier and we might have found him by now." Tears began to spill over once more.

"Jonny," She threw her arm around his shoulder, leaning her head on him, "Will is a good kid. Never in a million years could you have been able to guess that this would happen. Okay? This is not your fault."

She needed to believe her own words. She had told herself all day that it was her fault that Will was missing. If only she had just taken him last night. Yeah, she was exhausted, but that was no excuse, at least not to Alice.

"Alice!" Lucy's voice rang out from Jonathan's bedroom. Worried, she strode quickly to the room at the end of the hallway. She calmed down after realizing that there was no threat.

"Hey, sweetie. What's up?" She said sweetly, leaning on the doorway.

"Is Auntie Joyce okay?" Lucy asked quietly, pointing into Will's room. Joyce sat on the bed, her back to the door, clutching one of Will's t-shirts tightly to her chest. "She's been in there a long time."

"I'll go check on her. When I come back, it'll be time to go, okay?" Lucy pouted but nodded.

Alice turned her back on Jonathan's room and slowly stepped into the eerily quiet room across from it. She knocked lightly on the doorframe.

"Mama? Can I come in?" Alice said softly. Joyce nodded her head slightly and Alice made her way over to the bed. She sat down next to the worried mother.

Joyce was always the source of strength in Alice's life. Joyce had played a major part in keeping Alice afloat after her mother abandoned her, all while juggling the life of a woman with two kids and a failing marriage.

"Oh, Alice," Joyce whispered, "What do I do?"

"I don't know, Mama. We just need to have hope. We need to trust Hopper and the search party and Will will be home before you know it." Alice grabbed Joyce's hand and squeezed tightly. "He's going to be okay."

It was Alice's turn to have strength for the both of them.

"You believe that?" She asked, her voice barely audible.

"I do. I really do."

2. There's a Freakshow in Town

She stood in the middle of a dark forest. Paralyzed. She couldn't move. Her eyes darted back and forth across the landscape in front of her.

"Alice!" Will's distorted voice called out. It sounded more like a growl than anything human, but she recognized Will's small voice deep in the cluster of noise.

Regaining her ability to move, she ran. Her bare feet padded violently against the wet autumn leaves on the forest floor. It reminded her of Mirkwood, but something wasn't right. Strange particles floated through the air like snowflakes and vines entangled the trees, draping off of the branches like some sort of snake-like monster.

She ran faster. She could feel her heartbeat in her fingertips. She was breathing heavily, but she didn't feel out of breath. She just kept running.

"Alice!" His voice rang out again, this time closer than the last. She could feel that he was nearby, but she couldn't see him.

"Will!" She screamed, desperately looking around every tree, whipping her head around violently in hopes of catching a glimpse of the little boy.

Then everything stopped. The landscape around her changed.

She was standing in the pitch black. The only thing illuminated was a small silhouette of Castle Byers in the distance.

She took a step forward and it made a small splash. She was then standing in water that was only a few centimeters deep--it made small ripples with every single step. Though, there was no sound. It was as if she was in a vacuum and the only thing there was herself.

"Will?" Her voice echoed as she moved her hand forward to pull back the curtain. She retracted it quickly as a small handprint pushed

towards her, through the curtain. It created a small imprint and Alice moved her hand closer. It was Will. It had to be. She thought back to all of the times that she entered Castle Byers, all of the times that he wouldn't leave the small base, all of the times that he wouldn't speak to anyone except her. She was the first one to use the password. She couldn't go in without saying the password.

"Radagast," she whispered.

A slimy claw-like hand burst through the curtain and as soon as it reached Alice's face, she quickly sat up in her bed. She inhaled sharply and ran her hand through her hair.

Her back was soaked with sweat and her hair was matted to her forehead. The morning light had not yet begun to shine through the windows, her room was still doused in sleep. The clock on her wall ticked quietly, reading 2:17.

She had only slept for 3 hours and, after what she just went through, she didn't want to try again. The twins wouldn't be awake for another 4 hours so, until then, she had the night to herself.

She contemplated going to Steve's. She knew that his parents were gone at a conference and she knew where the spare key was. Then she acknowledged the fact that Steve slept like the dead. He wouldn't be fully awake until about an hour after he woke up. So she didn't want to spend her time with that.

Her next thought was to go to the Byers' home. She quickly decided against it--Joyce and Jonathan needed their sleep.

She wrote a note for the twins and left it on the kitchen table just in case she didn't make it home right away. Alice had taught the twins to read her simple sentences before anything else just in case she had to take a night shift and was home late or if she had one of her morning rides with Steve.

The sun had not yet begun to peek up over the horizon, there wasn't even a hint of light. Streetlights brightly illuminated sections of the road, like an old black-and-white movie. It was the time of night where absolutely no one was on the road. Especially in the small

town of Hawkins. The only things that she could hear were the mellow machine hum from the engine of her car and the sound of her tires against the road.

Her eyes kept darting back and forth across the road, hoping to see Will pop out somewhere with his red vest on and he would hug her and he would be safe and everything would be okay.

It was quite obvious that she didn't worry about the things that a normal teenager would. Yes, she was still overwhelmed by her grades and high school in general, but she was also the only parental figure for her twin siblings. She had a lot to juggle and it seemed that someone just kept adding more things to her pile.

The lights were on in Hopper's trailer, despite it being two in the morning. Alice's Monte Carlo slowly pulled into the dimly lit driveway, her tires crunching against the uneven gravel. Hopper, seeing the headlights through his window, met Alice at the door--half-naked.

"What's wrong?" He asked, leaning against the doorframe. Alice closed her car door with a loud thump and traversed her way up to the house.

"What? I can't visit my favorite police chief?" She said, acting all innocent, even though she knew that he wasn't buying it.

"It's two a.m., Alice. What's wrong?" He pestered. Alice walked straight past the older man and made a b-line for his fridge. The door opened and illuminated the small kitchen area with a warm white light.

"I don't want you to think that I'm crazy, but I didn't know where else to go." She spoke, opening a can of Coca-Cola. As it cracked open, the drink bubbled up over the edge of the can and dripped onto the floor. Hopper opened his mouth to speak, but Alice waved her hand in front of his face.

"I'm cleaning it up, don't worry." She moved over to the hallway closet to retrieve a small hand towel.

"You're stalling," Hopper said, looking down at the teen that was frantically wiping up a relatively small spill.

"Am not," she stopped mid-scrub and looked up at him.

"Are too. Don't pull this crap with me, Alice." He pulled her off the ground and tightly grabbed her wrist. "You barged into my trailer at two in the morning, quit the 'I'm not stalling' bullshit because it's really obvious that you are." He walked her to his couch and forced her to sit down. "Now, spill."

Resisting every urge to joke about the Coca-Cola that she literally just spilled on the ground, she slumped down in her seat and threw her hands over her face. She spoke a few muffled words.

"Alice," Hopper said, annoyed with the teenager.

She threw her hands from her face and yelled, "You wouldn't believe me!" Hopper sat down beside Alice and showed her the bracelet on his wrist. The charm sparkled as the light of the static TV shone against it.

"You can trust me."

"I saw Will." She spoke slowly, "It was in a dream, but it felt so real, Hopper. Like, I could feel the water on my feet and the breeze on my face." It was obvious that he had no idea where Alice was going with this. Alice looked Hopper in the eyes and grabbed his hand tightly. "I was at Castle Byers and I saw Will. But then he disappeared and in his place was a—"

She stops. She doesn't know what exactly she encountered in her dreamland. All she knew was that it wasn't human and that it didn't seem to like her very much.

"A what?" Hopper questioned.

"A monster."

Alice didn't even try to explain what she witnessed and Hopper saw that she was much too scared to even think about giving him an explanation. He chalked it up to her being an over-tired, overworked

teenager and sent her back home so she could help the twins get ready for school.

This morning was different from the others. Lucy and Tommy were awake after the first time that Alice went into their room and they didn't fuss at all. Both of them were dressed, fed, and ready to go right on time. Alice quietly thanked God at the ease of this morning and the three of them were off to school.

At their usual meeting spot, Alice's locker, Steve stood, clutching a binder full of papers that he never actually used.

"Hey, bunny." He looked at her and gasped. "Jeez, Al, you don't look too good."

"I just had a bad nightmare last night, it's fine. I promise." Then the conversation about Alice's wellbeing ended as Steve began to go on about Nancy.

Alice couldn't shake the image of that *thing's* hand latching onto her face, the slime squelching as it made contact. She winced at the mere thought of it. She couldn't help but think that it all meant something. She was ripped from her train of thought by Steve waving his hand in front of her face. She grabbed it and pushed it away. He stood there looking at her, worried. She was so jumpy today, and she didn't listen to a single word that came out of his mouth.

"Are you sure that you're okay?"

"Yeah," she said breathily, "I already told you. It was just a nightmare."

Steve didn't believe her, but he knew better than to pick a fight. Especially when she wasn't in a good mood. He had no chance of winning.

"Well, my parents are out of town this weekend and I'm throwing a party at the house. It'll probably just be me, Nancy, Carol, and Tommy. Feel free to pop by after you put the twins to bed," Steve softly put his hand on her shoulder, "Feel better, bunny."

The rest of the day was a blur. Classes flew by as the minutes quickly

ticked away. Alice met Steve by his car at the end of the day.

“So what exactly was the nightmare? Like, why is it scaring you so much?” Steve asked. She cringed at the thought of the horrific image.

She explained everything to him. The forest, Mirkwood, the water, Castle Byers, the handprint... the monster.

“You know that it’s just a nightmare, right? It’s not real.” Steve said, trying to comfort Alice in his own way. But she wasn’t hearing it.

“You don’t understand, Steve. It was real. All of it! I knew that you wouldn’t believe me.” She got out of the car and slammed the door. Steve got out after her.

“What do you want me to say?” he put on a mocking voice, “*Oh, Alice, I’m sorry that you actually believe that a monster took the kid.* Maybe he ran away! Or maybe he jumped into the quarry, huh? This is real life, Alice! This isn’t make-believe bullshit!”

She scoffed--there’s that douche-y Steve Harrington that everyone else saw. Alice and Steve have been friends for so long, they’ve seen each other through everything, but *this* Steve, the Steve standing in front of her right now was her least favorite. He wasn’t the sweet, kind-hearted boy that she grew up with, that helped care for the twins. He’s King Steve, ruler of Hawkins high.

“What happened to you?” She asked, her words soaked with venom.

The car ride home with the twins didn’t make her day any better than it already was. Lucy spoke about how she missed Will and Jonathan and Alice didn’t have the heart to tell her that she didn’t know when or if Will was ever coming over again.

After that, the night was quite tame. Alice and the twins went through the regular schedule of the night--get home, start making dinner, help the twins with their homework, jam to cassettes for about an hour while they get ready for bed, and then tuck the twins in around 8:30 PM. Alice had kept that schedule since she started caring for the twins and it hasn’t failed her yet.

The time was now 9:00 PM and the twins were fast asleep. Alice sat

at the kitchen table and contemplated whether or not to go over to Steve's. Yeah, yeah, he was kind of a douche to her but she still loved him like no other. So, she started up the Monte Carlo and followed the familiar drive to the Harrington home.

As she turned down the main road to get to his house, she spotted Barb's car pulled over to the side of the road. She knew exactly what was going on. Nancy probably didn't want the neighbors to see the car in the driveway and tell her parents.

Steve was surprised to see Alice, especially after how their last conversation ended. But, nonetheless, he welcomed her in the house and immediately handed her a can of soda. Unlike the others, Alice had actual children to take care of at home, there was no way she could risk being drunk or hungover while caring for them.

The duration of the night was basically Carol and Tommy totally eating each other's faces, Steve and Nancy absolutely gushing over each other, and Barb and Alice talking about how they think they did on Kaminski's test.

"Barb," Alice said quietly, "Are you doing okay? You definitely seem like you don't want to be here."

"Mind reader alert," Barb chuckled, "I came here to watch over Nancy to make sure she didn't do anything stupid," She glared at Steve, "and I didn't even think about whether or not she'd listen to me."

"She's got to learn," Alice said kindly, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder, "Have I ever told you about Lucy and the stove?" Barb shook her head as she dangled her feet off the diving board over the pool.

"Well," she began, "Lucy likes to explore. She is a bombastic, sassy little girl and she does not like to listen to me. So, one morning when I was making breakfast, I had taken the pan off of the stove and the burner was still on. I saw Lucy try to touch the burner and I told her not to do that because she could get hurt. Long story short, she touched the stove anyway, had a small burn on her hand for about a month, and did not stop apologizing to me for the whole day," Alice

looked at the girl next to her, “Do you get what I mean?”

Barb nodded, “If she doesn’t listen and she gets burned, it’s her fault for not listening. I can be there after the burn with the ice to help her feel better but she won’t learn until she feels the pain herself.”

“Exactly. I have to go to the bathroom, but I’ll be here a little longer. You can totally save yourself now and I’ll make sure Nancy gets a ride home.” Alice said, slowly inching her way back to the mainland.

“I think I’ll have to take you up on that offer. I can’t stay up late unless I’m studying for something.” They both chuckled as Alice made her way toward the sliding door. “Hey, Alice?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” Barb said, smiling softly. Alice returned the smile and made her way to the bathroom.

Alice looked at herself in the mirror and studied herself intently. She hadn’t slept more than three hours in the last day and it was definitely showing. Her eyes had dark bags under them and she just looked exhausted.

Without warning, Alice noticed the light out by the pool flicker, get extremely bright and then burn out. Barb was nowhere to be seen. Alice started to breathe heavily, something somewhere in her mind told her that it was nothing, Barb just left and then the light burnt out. Deep down, though, she felt that something was wrong.

She ran back out the door and scoured Steve’s backyard, whispering Barb’s name in an attempt to find out if she had just moved somewhere that she couldn’t see. Alice trudged her way through the group of trees that lined Steve’s backyard when she heard a familiar growl that made her skin crawl.

It was the monster from her nightmare.

It was nowhere to be seen but Alice felt it’s presence. The air was heavy and frigid and Alice was petrified. She felt that it was nearby. She wanted to investigate further into the thicket but decided against it as she thought about the twins back at home. She couldn’t risk

leaving the twins with no caretaker.

She backed away, eyes glued to the tree line when her eyes darted to some movement in the trees. Within the thicket, she saw a faint dark figure and her heart sank. She quickly turned on her heels and sprinted into the Harrington home, doing her best to slam the sliding door behind her.

Tommy H and Carol were completely oblivious to the panting girl making her way out the front door.

She didn't even bother to put on her seat belt. The Monte Carlo roared to life and Alice sped away, not even realizing that Barb's car was still parked on the side of the road.

3. Leave It to the Professionals

“Alice!” A duet of small voices screeched in her eardrums, “We have to go to school!”

The twins had gotten used to waking up on time that sometimes they didn’t even need Alice to help them. Today was, in fact, one of those days. The twins jumped up and down on her bed, attempting to wake up their extremely tired older sister. The events of the night prior had basically knocked Alice out. The second that she got home, she checked on the twins and, after she realized that they were safe, she immediately went to sleep, neglecting to set her alarm clock for the next morning.

Lucy started to pull the covers off of Alice when she finally shot awake. “I’m up! I promise, I’m awake!” She shouted, throwing the blanket off of herself and peering at the clock on her night stand. She thanked God that she got in the habit of waking the twins up early because it wasn’t even past 7:30 yet.

She studied the kids. Tommy had managed to put on one of Lucy’s shirts--which was pretty good considering he still got his head stuck no matter whose shirt he was wearing. Lucy was wearing a skirt over a pair of jeans and the little cowboy boots that Steve got her last year.

“Do you guys want to wear that to school today?” Alice asked, waiting for the verdict.

Lucy looked at Alice intently, “Don’t we look pretty?”

“You both look wonderful,” she smiled, “Go brush your hair and I’ll start breakfast.”

“Alice,” Tommy asked, pulling on Alice’s shirt, “Can we just have cereal this morning?” Normally this would have upset Alice but, today, she knew that they were going to be on a time crunch.

“Of course, kiddo,” she agreed as the two little ones darted into the hallway, pushing each other into the wall in an attempt to beat the

other one to the bathroom.

It was an easy morning once again. Following a small altercation between the twins over which side of the mirror they wanted to use, she was able to get them to school without a hitch.

“This is Alice, attempting to establish communication with the party, over.” She said, repeating the message a few times over the supercomm with a pause in between.

She sat in the front seat of her car, her head resting against the seat behind her. Her breath harmonized with the static coming from the device in her hand.

“Alice, this is Lucas. You got all of us here, over.” She smiled at his words.

“Hey, honey. I’m just checking in on you and the boys. How are you all holding up? Over.” She asked. Alice cared about these boys like they were her own children, she couldn’t even imagine how this situation was affecting them.

“We’re doing alright, Alice.” She recognized Mike’s voice. There were muffled noises coming through in the background but she couldn’t make out what the boys were saying.

“Yeah, we miss you!” Dustin chimed in.

“Well, let me know if you guys need anything. I’m willing to give rides, we can drive around town with the twins,” she offered, “I miss you guys too, over.”

Mrs. Wheeler’s voice screeched through the supercomm. “We got to go, Alice. We’ll talk soon! Over and out,” Lucas explained.

“Love you, dweebs. Over and out,” She smiled and finally decided to get out of the car and make her way into the school.

She studied the crowd of students around her. None of them understood what was going on in her world right now. All of them had their own lives to pay attention to, so they couldn’t be phased by someone else’s.

“Jonathan!” She yelled, noticing the boy’s presence in the hallway. She sped up her walking and made her way towards him. She had to push her way through the crowded hallway but she was soon at the locker of the upset teen.

“Jonny, how are you?” She asked, already basically knowing his answer.

“I don’t even know what to feel, Al. My mom’s going insane and I just feel helpless,” he slammed his locker door and leaned against the wall, facing Alice.

“I totally feel for you. Let me know if there’s anything I can do. The twins miss you a lot, they’re crabby because they haven’t seen you in awhile,” Alice chuckled, “Though they might just want to play with the train set.”

“I’d keep them away from the house for a while, Mom’s gone kind of nuts. Have you told them?” Jonathan asked.

Alice had dreaded the conversation with the twins about how their “best friend” is missing and might not come home ever again. Will was so good with the twins; Alice could leave the three of them alone for hours and not worry about a thing. Since Will was the baby of his family, he enjoyed coming over to watch the twins because they made him feel like their older brother--he was so protective of them.

“I’ve avoided bringing them downtown because of the missing posters if that’s any indication. I just think about how all of this is affecting you and me and I can’t even imagine how they would take it--if they would even understand.” Alice admitted.

“If we don’t find him--” Jonathan began.

“You know that we will, Jonny. Don’t start talking like that.”

“It just feels hopeless, Alice. I don’t know what to do,” he said, his frustration growing very obvious.

“We will do our best and, before you know it, Will will be home again,” Alice said, laying her hand on his shoulder before walking to first period.

The moment she walked into first period and noticed that Barb wasn't in her normal spot next to Nancy. Studying the girl with the absent best friend, Alice noticed that Nancy seemed on edge. Her leg was bouncing up and down and she nervously tapped her finger on the desk.

"Nancy, have you seen Barb today?" Alice asked, hoping that she was sick or anything other than the thought that was running through her head.

"No, I was hoping that you had," Nancy said, anxiously playing with her hair, looking up pleadingly at Alice. She swore under her breath and hugged her textbooks close to her chest.

"I'm sure she just--she just felt sick and stayed home. I mean, it was kinda--kinda cold last night." Alice said, finding an excuse for the absence of the girl with perfect attendance. She tried her best to ease both her and Nancy's wandering minds, but it was no use. "You know, I'm not feeling too good either. Tell Eastman that I tried, please?" Alice said before speeding out of the classroom.

Her mind raced. It couldn't have been playing tricks on her, right? She felt the same figure from her dream in Steve's backyard after the lights went out and Barb, supposedly, went missing.

Oh my God, Alice, you are going insane. She thought to herself. You just haven't been getting enough sleep since Will went missing and you probably imagined it.

Outside of the school was a payphone that was open to all of the students. Normally, Alice would use it to contact Steve if he skipped school or Joyce to pick up the twins if she had a test to work on after school. Now, however, she was using it to contact the police station.

"Hi, Flo, it's Alice Darrow. Is Hopper there yet?" She asked after the third ring.

"He just got here, sweetie. Is there a message you'd like to leave for him?" Flo said, her kind demeanor showing through the phone.

“No, please just keep him there until I show up,” Alice pleaded, “There’s something I’d like to speak with him about but not over the phone.”

“I’ll try my best, dear. Is everything alright?” Flo questioned kindly.

“Yeah, let’s just say that. Thank you, Flo.” She said, avoiding any expression of nerves or anxiety about the circumstances that she was in.

Flo kept her promise, much to Hopper’s chagrin, and the chief had been “barricaded” in the police station. Hopper looked visibly annoyed at the teenager as she made her way into the station.

“What is so important that you not only skipped school but came to see me at my *job*?” He said, arms crossed at the teenager in front of him. The two of them walked through the station to Hopper’s office in the back. Alice had requested that they speak away from the other officers and Hopper obliged, understanding that the young girl may feel intimidated by the other people in the station. She sat at his desk, nervously playing with the hem of her shirt.

“Well, I’m here. You got me. What do you want?”

“I need you to give me something to do. I’m going insane and I want to help,” Alice explained, “I feel like I’m not doing anything and I need you to tell me what to do.” Hopper thought for a moment.

“Why don’t you just go to school, huh? I know you want to help but the best thing you can do right now is leave it to the professionals,” Hopper said, attempting to be the level-headed one in the room.

“Flo said that you went to Hawkins Lab, why?” Alice interrogated. Hopper cursed the talkativeness of his secretary.

“Alice, you know that that is none of your business,” Hopper told her, doing his best to show the authority that he held. Alice wasn’t buying it. Truthfully, she was curious, but she also wanted to be a part of the investigation.

“Make it my business then!” She shrieked, “I can be your helper! I was in the debate club for two weeks, Hopper, you know that I’m not losing this.”

The chief paused, looking at the teenager in front of him. He noticed how different she looked in only a few days. Will Byers’ disappearance had taken a toll on her but he didn’t realize just how much it had until just now. It was obvious that she hadn’t been sleeping. Add the lack of sleep to teenage perseverance and Hopper knew that Alice wasn’t backing down.

“Fine,” He gave up, “Come to the library with me.”

Alice had not been to the public library in a very long time. She had gone there with her father almost every week when she was younger and, though she wanted the twins to experience the same things she did, it just hurt a little bit too much. Rows and rows of neatly lined books with all of their spines facing outwards sparked memories of her and her father.

Hopper filled Alice in on his trip to Hawkins Lab: the sketchy security tape, their reluctance to allow the police to search for Will, their immediate belief that there was no way that Will went to the lab.

“Do you have a police scanner in your car?” Hopper asked.

“I got youngin's, Hop. I don’t need them hearing about Ol’ Rudy running his car into a flagpole. Again.” Alice said, chuckling.

He handed Alice a police-issue two-way radio, “Normally, we’d only give them to our officers, but I figured that this would be the easiest way to contact each other. And, I don’t want you annoying Flo anymore.”

Alice scoffed, grabbing the small radio out of his hand, “You and I both know that Flo loves me. If anything, you’re the one that annoys her,” she chuckled, making her way to the microfiche archive drawers.

“I’ll start with the Post, you start with the Times. Bring out anything you can find about Hawkins Lab or anyone associated with them.” Hopper ordered.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Alice said, saluting the chief.

The two of them spent the whole day shuffling through as many newspapers as they could. Alice began looking at reference books to see when Hawkins Lab was created and they extended their search even further.

Truthfully, Alice enjoyed the distraction from everything going on. She felt as if she was doing something to help Will instead of just sitting around sulking.

“A lot of the same names are popping up, Hop.” Alice pointed out.

Hawkins Lab. Dr. Martin Brenner. MKUltra. Terry Ives.

Hawkins Lab was run by Dr. Martin Brenner and, back in the days before Hawkins Lab was created, he was a part of the CIA-sanctioned research project called MKUltra. Terry Ives was a “test subject” from that research project and she filed abuse claims against those involved, one of them being Brenner, specifically.

“Now, I know that correlation does not equal causation, but you can’t begin to tell me that this doesn’t seem fishy.” Alice began, pulling out a front page newspaper clipping that read “MKUltra Exposed” with Brenner in the picture, “I’m not saying grand conspiracy or anything like that,” she began.

“I get what you mean. Maybe Will saw something that he wasn’t supposed to and,” he paused, feeling the weight of his own words, “they had to take care of it.”

“I mean, it’s a start,” Alice said, checking the clock on the wall, “I have to go get the kids.” She gathered her things and slid all of the newspaper clippings to Hopper’s side of the table.

“Hop, I gotta get serious for a second.” Alice admitted, sitting on the table in front of him. “This shit worries me. I don’t like that the government is testing us and—who knows, maybe they’re listening to us too! I just want to have something that we can do that lets the other know if they’re safe.”

“Like a code word?”

“I mean, when you say it like that, it sounds childish,” He raised his eyebrows at her like she wasn’t the one out of the pair that was an actual child, “But yeah.”

“We can’t be suspicious,” Hopper said, playing into her plan, “It can’t be something completely obvious.”

“Maybe a movie title? Like—”

“*Grease?*”

The two came up with the perfect code. If one asked the other if they

wanted to watch *Grease* and the other agreed, then they are safe. However, if they disagree and say another movie title, they would be able to know if the other is in trouble. Alice got Hopper's permission to come after him if he was truly in trouble, he even permitted her to use his emergency firearm if necessary.

"I'll let you know if I need anything," Hopper said as Alice made her way to the door, "Don't be afraid to use the two-way, okay?"

"Aye, aye, captain," Alice saluted before making her journey to receive the children and bring them back home.

The twins easily adapted when it came to bedtime. Sometimes Alice would have to leave them at the after-school daycare in order to work on homework or work on projects with fellow students without having to worry about the twins. Other times, she would have them walk the short distance to the middle school where Scott Clarke, the science teacher, would watch them for hours on end.

No matter, Alice and the twins made it home that night when it was already dark. Tommy had managed to fall asleep during the short, noisy car ride—Lucy had found her favorite cassette tape and was very passionately serenading Alice the entire way home.

"Mr. Clarke fed you both, right?" Alice asked, carrying Tommy on her hip while her other hand held onto Lucy's.

Lucy skipped ahead of her, immediately beginning to remove her clothes so she could change into her pajamas. "Yep! He got us McDonald's!"

"Tommy, sweetheart," his eyes fluttered slowly, "You have to get changed into your pj's, okay?"

He groaned but obliged, lethargically lifting his shirt over his head.

Once the two of them were completely changed and had brushed their teeth, the night quieted down quickly.

"Goodnight, my dears," Alice said, slowly closing the twin's door behind her.

She figured that she had homework, but since she hadn't been at school, she had no clue what was due. Her boredom swiftly grew, enough so to turn on the police scanner and listen to the main frequency.

"Can someone confirm the 10-54 at the quarry? Do we have units on site yet?" A muffled female voice crackled through the radio.

"We were the first city unit on site, ma'am. Staties made it here before us. I can confirm that there is a body." Alice's heart dropped. It couldn't be Will, could it? There was only one way to be sure.

Alice darted out the front door, trying her best not to wake the twins as she hopped in her Monte Carlo and sped towards the quarry. Her head was racing faster than her car, her mind spinning faster than the tires on the cracked road beneath her.

Hopper recognized the sound of Alice's car as she sped down the hill. He walked toward the erratic girl slowly losing her balance on the loose gravel below her.

"Hopper," she said quietly, grabbing the man's shoulders to stabilize herself, "Please. Just tell me that it isn't him." She attempted to look over Hopper's shoulder but he grabbed her and forced her to look at him. "Don't do this, Hopper. I gotta know."

She pushed past the chief and her heart stopped. Or, at least, it felt like it would. She fell to her knees, her mind too busy with her surroundings to worry about the pain she was experiencing. She felt

her hands grow cold as she watched the quarry intently. Her eyes began to water. Her brain hadn't yet registered what she was seeing, but, deep in her chest, she knew.

It was Will.

4. If Only

How was she going to tell the twins? They already had to go through the departure of both of their parents, she couldn't imagine the toll it would take on their young, growing minds if she told them that one of their best friends died. Do they even know what that means? Would they understand?

And the boys. The boys were going to be devastated.

A deputy had collected Alice from the ground and helped her back to her car, even offering to give her a ride back to her home. She denied.

The lonely ride back to the house was deathly silent. How she yearned to look over at the passenger seat and see Will sitting there—his dirty sneakers propped up on her dash, his backpack under his feet, his favorite red vest lazily draped on only one shoulder because "it was cool". She couldn't believe that he was gone.

She made it home, nearly veering off of the road at least twice because of her impaired vision due to the tears pooling in her eyes. None had fallen yet. She knew that, once she began, she wouldn't be able to stop.

Alice lay stiff in her bed, her eyes glued to the ceiling, her mind clouded with grief and confusion. She had so many questions but she knew that they would probably never be answered. So she lay there, quiet in her bed, content with the disorientation she felt. There was no way that she'd be able to sleep—if the nightmares were bad before Will was confirmed to be dead, they would be unbearable now.

She quietly tiptoed to the bathroom, turning the shower on, making sure that the water was nearly scalding before she got in. Perhaps the hot water would allow her to feel something other than the numbness she was currently experiencing. She sat in the bathtub, the water trailing down the back of her neck, as tears began to fall. She gripped her hair in her hands, pulling so hard that it hurt immensely.

If I had just given him a ride home that night, she thought, if I had done

something, literally anything, maybe Will would still be alive.

Muffled by the sound of the water, she let out a strangled sob, finally allowing herself to feel something. Finally allowing her heart to break.

Behind closed doors, she was a wreck, but she knew that she had to be strong for her kids.

When the twins woke up, they were met with an extremely cheery Alice, which they didn't mind. When Alice was happy, she made a big breakfast and today, the twins noticed, it was huge!

"Good morning, kiddos," Alice said happily, helping Lucy and Tommy into their chairs at the table.

The three of them chowed down on the delicious breakfast that Alice made while Lucy babbled on about how, in her dream last night, she played at the "biggest playground in the world."

Since Alice wanted to make sure that the twins didn't think that anything was wrong, she allowed them to pick out their own outfits today. Surprisingly, they didn't do that bad. Lucy had found a pair of Tommy's overalls and a tie dye sweater that Joyce had bought her. Tommy, on the other hand, had uncovered a pair of bright blue sweatpants that he paired with the sweater that matched Lucy's. Alice still had to help them put their shoes on and she noticed that both of them had worn mismatched socks.

When Alice and the twins finally made it to Hawkins Elementary school, instead of dropping them off in the circle, she pulled into the teacher's parking lot and walked them inside.

She knelt down to hug them and watched as they ran down the hall, hand-in-hand, to their first class.

She walked into the principal's office, asking the secretary if she could just speak to him for a moment. She obliged and Alice made her way into the bleak, brightly lit room.

"Excuse me, sir," Alice said, quietly knocking on the door frame, "I have a concern and was hoping if you could help me out."

"Of course, Ms. Darrow, please come in," he gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

"As I'm sure you know, Will Byers' body was found at the quarry last night," Alice choked out, her voice wavering as she said Will's name, "I don't want to tell my kids about it just yet, as I'd prefer if they heard it from me."

"I've already told the teachers to stay silent on the matter, but I can't say the same about the children in the class with them. I don't know if all of the parents are taking the same steps as you. I'll do my best, but I can't guarantee anything, Ms. Darrow." The lanky man said, fiddling with the pen in his hand.

"I understand. Thank you for your time."

Alice contemplated whether or not she should go to school. Truthfully, she didn't want to see anyone today, but she already skipped yesterday. She figured that she would take a half day, ultimately deciding to go to school after lunch.

She turned around in the driver seat and picked the two-way radio that Hopper gave her off of the floor in the backseat.

"This is Alice. Hopper, can you hear me?"

The chief's voice crackled through the speaker, "I'm here, Alice. What do you need?" She sniffled, the comfort of hearing Hopper's voice permitting her to break down.

"Can I come see you?"

Hopper didn't question it. Sincerely, after meeting with Joyce following Will's discovery, he was emotionally drained. But, Alice needed him to be strong, so that's what he would be.

The moment that Hopper heard the engine of Alice's Monte Carlo, he slowly walked out of the trailer and met her at her car. Opening the door for her, he noticed the tear tracks that stained her face, wondering how she managed to drive safely. Alice sniffled, turning off the car and allowing Hopper to close the car door behind her.

She didn't even make it to the porch when she collapsed into Hopper's arms. He was taken aback for a moment, but quickly regained clarity and held onto the teenager tightly.

"It can't be true, it just can't be," she sobbed, her fists balling around his ratty grey tank top, "You saw the paper clippings, the labs can cover up everything! He could- he could still be alive! Right?" She didn't even believe her own words.

The two of them stood there for what felt like an eternity, but Hopper didn't mind. He had been there for her dad's death and her mother's consequent departure, and now he was here for the loss of the boy that she treated like another son.

She finally separated from the man and wiped her nose. She choked out a sob when she saw the stain that she had created on his shirt, "I'm sorry."

"Shirts can be washed, kiddo. You're okay." He welcomed her inside the trailer, making his way to the fridge.

Due to the sight of a tower of dirty laundry piled up by his bedroom door, she wasn't sure that he knew that shirts could be washed. She quietly chuckled at her nit picking and accepted the Coca Cola that he handed her as both of them sat on the dirty couch.

The two of them remained for a while, making quiet conversation in the comfort that they created for one another, when Alice finally decided that she had to go to school. Hopper agreed, coming up with a plan to say that she was "working on an internship with him" to make sure that her absences were not considered trancies. He even offered a police escort, but she denied, not wanting a huge amount of attention drawn to her.

"We're going to be okay, Alice. You gotta believe that." They embraced once more before Hopper watched Alice turn the corner, disappearing behind a veil of trees.

After Sara's death, Hopper felt like he wasn't allowed to be a father anymore, like, it was the universe's way of putting him on the bench and telling him that "this just isn't for you." But then Alice came to

the precinct the day after her mother left and he knew that this was his job now. And, God, she annoyed him sometimes, but she was the closest thing he's had to Sara since she passed and he wasn't going to let that go.

At school, Alice's eyes stayed glued to the floor, she couldn't bear the thought of making eye contact with anyone. Her car had finally rolled into the parking lot at the same time that everyone was making it back from lunch.

In the crowded hallway, Alice heard her name being shouted from a short distance away. It was Steve.

"Alice!" He yelled once more, dodging the empty faces in the hall in an attempt to reach his best friend. She wouldn't acknowledge him, she continued to keep her head down. Steve grabbed Alice's shoulder and pulled her to the side of the hallway, out of the way of the student traffic. The metal of the locker was cold on her back but Steve's hand was warm on her shoulder. "Look at me," he said, bending down to try and lock eyes with her, but she wouldn't.

"Steve, stop," she said quietly, tears beginning to pool in her eyes. She felt weak, like she couldn't even pull herself together to face her best friend.

"Alice Jillian Darrow, look at me right now," his hands cupped her cheeks and forced her to look at him, "You skipped yesterday and then the kid and you weren't here until lunch and--"

"I told you never to use my middle name," she said sharply, yanking her face away from him, "and I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, that's okay. You don't have to talk about it. I just want to know if you're okay," he said calmly.

"I'm okay," she insisted, a pained smile growing on her face.

"I'm coming over tonight. I'm going to make dinner for you and the twins and--"

"Steve," she interrupted once more, "You don't need to--" He brought a finger to her lips to silence her. She rolled her eyes at the childish

gesture.

“See, the thing is, bunny, I do need to. I haven’t seen the twins in a while and just think that they’ve been missing me. They’ve been deprived of their incomparable Uncle Steve. And, dearest Alice, no matter what you say, I am coming over and I’m making dinner.”

He wasn’t lying.

“Uncle Steve!” Tommy screeched, running towards the door.

Steve scooped up the small boy in his arms and spun him around, carefully not to hit his head on the doorframe. He had two paper grocery bags in his other hand and Alice quickly moved to grab them so he wouldn’t drop them. Lucy followed Tommy and latched onto Steve’s leg.

The energy in the house brightened immediately when Steve walked in—he had a superpower in that sense.

“How are you, bunny?” Steve asked quietly, giving Alice a peck on the cheek.

“The boys haven’t been answering their supercomms all day and I’m worried,” Alice said, putting the contents of the grocery bags on the kitchen counter.

“Well,” he paused, finding the words, “It affects everyone differently, Al. They’re just kids.”

“We’re kids!” Lucy yelled, poking Tommy’s bottom. Alice broke away from her melancholy thoughts and scooped Lucy up in her arms.

“Yes, you are! You are my favorite kids, you know that, right?” Alice said, tickling the young girl’s exposed stomach.

Soon after, the house welcomed a wonderful symphony of smells—Steve was making hamburgers. Alice sat at the kitchen table, Lucy and Tommy on either side of her. They had ripped blank pages out of Alice’s biology notebook and were completely enthralled in the surreal crayon drawing that they were creating. Tommy murmured about how he was going to be an amazing artist when he grew up

and Lucy agreed, pointing out that his picture was a masterpiece.

When the two of them were done drawing, Alice gave them magnets and they hung their crayon drawings up on the fridge. The fridge was completely filled with other similar drawings, next to photos of Alice and the gang in Mike's basement that Karen had developed for her.

A dissonant clinking sound came from Steve as he tapped a glass with a butter knife, "Food's on!" He sang, gliding over to the table and setting down full plates of food in front of the Darrows.

The whole night, the four of them talked, sang, danced, and threw food—Tommy had to sit in time-out for getting ketchup in Lucy's hair. For that sliver of time, they had created their own little family. It was out of the ordinary, to say the least, but it was where they found solace.

Lucy lay splayed across Alice's lap on the couch, the older girl running her fingers through the little one's hair.

"Little Tommy fell asleep," Steve whispered, holding the young boy to his chest. Alice chuckled quietly at the sight.

"Lucy's out too," she announced. The two of them made a silent plan and carefully carried the two sleeping children to their bedroom.

Alice made her nightly rounds—she turned on the small lamp that they used as a night light, tucked them in tightly, and kissed them on the forehead. Steve stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, watching the young mother carry out her duties. He smiled softly, recounting all of the nights that he had the pleasure of watching the same ritual.

The two teenagers retired to Alice's bedroom where Steve was demanding that he get to sleep on the left side of the bed.

"You have never slept on the left side before, what makes you believe that you get to tonight?" Alice said, pushing the boy in an attempt to get him over to the other side of the bed.

She was unsuccessful. Steve, after serving Alice defeat, immediately passed out on the left side of the bed.

"Alice, this is Hopper. Are you alone?" The man's voice crackled through the speaker of the two way radio. Alice quickly grabbed the radio and moved down the hallway into the living room.

"Steve's asleep in the other room, but yeah, I'm alone," she glanced at the clock, "It's late, what do you need?"

"Alice, I'm going to tell you something and you have to believe me, okay?" He pleaded, his voice slightly shaky.

"I trust you, Hop, I'll believe you." She heard him exhale over the radio.

"The body, the one that you saw the staties pull from the quarry last night, it wasn't real. Alice, it's a decoy. I saw it myself."

All of the breath from her lungs disappeared. She paused, taking in the full weight of his words.

"So, Will is- is alive? Does Joyce know?"

"Joyce was the one who tipped me off. I'm going to the lab right now to check it out further. So, if you don't hear from me by tomorrow afternoon-" Alice interrupted.

"You give me permission to use the revolver in the cabinet under your record player to go in guns blazin' and get you back." The two of them made that plan at the library. After finding out all of the suspicious information about the lab, they both understood how important it was that the other one knew where they were going.

"Atta girl," he smiled, "Now, get some sleep. I'll talk to you soon." His voice fizzled out.

"Will do, Chief. Over and out." She pushed down the long antennae on the radio and set it down on the coffee table.

Alice slumped back on the couch and went over the information that she knew for sure.

The body was fake. Will was still missing. She saw a creature in Steve's backyard. Barb was still missing. She was having nightmares

about Will. The boys haven't contacted her at all. Hopper was going to the laboratory to figure things out.

"Hey, bunny," Steve said, rubbing his eyes, "What're you still doing up?"

"Just heard something on the scanner, Steve. Go back to bed," she said, standing to meet him in the hallway.

Steve pouted, giving Alice puppy dog eyes, "But it's scary in there without you." He clasped his hands together in front of his chest, pleading jokingly.

"Alright, you big baby. Get in bed," She chuckled, pushing the teenager into her room. Taking a bigger hit than Alice actually gave, Steve fell face first onto the right side of the bed. Alice, taking the opportunity, immediately hopped onto the left side.

Steve groaned, realizing his mistake, before pulling the quilt up to his chin, "You win this time, Darrow."

"Goodnight, Steve."

5. Twintuition

Three boys sat around the table in Mike's basement with a young girl slumped on the couch next to them. After the discovery of Will through the heathkit, the three of them knew that they needed to dig deeper to find their friend.

Recalling the words that Will had spoken earlier, they racked each other's brain for anything that made sense.

"Upside down," Eleven said quietly, clearly exhausted from her interdimensional romp earlier in the day. Lucas became visibly confused because of her words.

Mike then began to understand. He peered at the upside game board on the table and started to explain, as best as he could, to the other two boys.

"Guys, come on, just think about it! What if this is Hawkins and," he flipped the board over, "this is where Will is? The Upside Down," Mike questioned.

"Like the Vale of Shadows," Dustin pointed out, quickly pulling out the Dungeons and Dragons expert rulebook from the bookshelf, "The Vale of Shadows is a dimension that is a dark reflection, or echo, of our world," He read out loud, following the text with his finger, "It is right next to you and you don't even see it."

"Well, how do we get there?" Lucas asked, finally believing in what the two boys were saying.

"You cast shadow walk," Dustin said, matter-of-factly.

Lucas scoffed, "In real life, dummy."

Dustin rephrased his answer, "We can't shadow walk," He looked over to Eleven, "but, maybe she can." To make things more difficult for the boys, Eleven didn't know how to travel to the Upside Down.

"How about we ask someone who might know?" Lucas suggested, "Alice knows D&D just as good as we do, maybe even better!"

Mike sat silent for a moment, contemplating his options, “We’re going to see her at Will’s funeral tomorrow. Maybe we can ask her then?”

“We trust her, right? Maybe we should tell her about Eleven too,” Dustin invited the idea.

“I don’t know, guys. Do you think she’ll believe us?” Mike said, concerned for the young girl on the couch beside him.

Lucas looked at him, dumbfounded, “Obviously she’s going to believe that we just happened to find a random girl where Will went missing, that she has superpowers, and we need her help to get her to travel to another dimension to find Will.”

The boys really didn't know Alice if they thought she wouldn't believe them.

Alice decided not to take the twins to the actual funeral, but only to the memorial service following it. Joyce loved the twins and today was definitely a day where she was in need of a distraction.

The boys, accompanied by the twins and Mr. Clarke, all of whom had clearly raided the dessert table, made their way over to the table where Alice was sitting. Lucy and Tommy both climbed up onto Alice’s lap, each sitting on one of the teenager’s legs.

“Hey, Alice, how are you doing?” Mr. Clarke asked, worried about the young mother.

Alice smiled weakly at him, attempting to keep the facade of mourning on her face, “I’m doing alright, Mr. Clarke. Thank you for asking.”

Mike interrupted the two’s interaction and immediately began asking the science teacher some questions, “So, you know how in Cosmos, Carl Sagan talks about other dimensions? Like beyond our world?”

Mr. Clarke, a little concerned by their random questions, took their curiosity as their coping mechanism and carried on the conversation.

“So, theoretically, how do we travel there?” Lucas questioned.

“Hugh Everett’s Many-Worlds Interpretation, right?” Alice chimed in. The boys looked at the girl, confused.

Mr. Clarke smiled and nodded. Tommy decided that he was tired of sitting in Alice’s lap and poked Mr. Clarke on the arm—which was his way of asking permission. Mr. Clarke hoisted Tommy off of Alice’s lap and onto his own, scootching his plate along with it.

“Well, basically, there are parallel universes. Just like our world but just infinite variations of it. Which means there’s a world out there where all of this stuff didn’t happen,” Mr. Clarke explained, referring to Will’s “passing.” The boys didn’t do a very good job of keeping up with the whole “mourning” thing. Alice lightly hit Lucas on the arm and he immediately changed his face to appear sad.

“We were thinking like a more evil dimension, like the Vale of Shadows,” Dustin chimed, “You know that Vale of Shadows, right?” Mr. Clarke began repeating the definition of the Vale of Shadows from the rulebook verbatim. Mike cut off his definition and finally got to the question that they wanted an answer for.

“If that did exist, a place like the Vale of Shadows, how would we travel there?”

Alice and Mr. Clarke looked at each other as if they were trying to read the other’s mind.

“Think about our world as a tightrope and we’re an acrobat,” Alice narrates as Mr. Clarke draws a diagram on his empty paper plate, “Our world has rules, we can move forward on the tightrope and backward.”

“What if there was a flea next to our acrobat? The flea can travel back and forth, just like the acrobat, right?” Mr. Clarke looked to the kids for confirmation that they were understanding what the two of them were saying, which they did.

“See, the interesting part is that the flea can also travel on the side of the tightrope and can even go, underneath the rope.” Alice finished.

“Upside down,” the three boys said in unison.

"But, we're not the flea, we're the acrobat," Mike chimed in. Mr. Clarke confirmed the boy's concern with a nod.

"Well, is there anyway for the acrobat to get to the Upside Down?" Dustin questioned.

"Well," Mr. Clarke thought, "You'd have to create a massive amount of energy."

"More than humans are capable of creating," Alice interrupted, "to, sort of, tear some kind of hole in time and space, and then," she took the plate and pen from Mr. Clarke and poked a hole through the plate, "you create an opening."

"Very well explained, Alice," Mr. Clarke chuckled, making a one-off comment about how Kaminski definitely didn't teach her all of that before explaining to the boys about how that energy could very well disrupt the electromagnetic field.

After the funeral and memorial service, it was then that they decided to tell her everything. Everything about Eleven, about Will, and the Upside Down.

For a moment, they thought they shouldn't because of the twins' presence in the basement with them, but figured that they were safe after they realized that they were just little kids.

"I completely believe you," the teenager said, causing all of the boys, even Dustin, who was pacing around, studying his compass, to stare at her, startled by her immediate belief.

Lucas stood with his mouth hanging open, "Wha- Why?"

"If I told anyone else about what has happened to me over the past few days, I'd end up in a sanitarium. Of course, I believe you guys."

Dustin lunged at Alice, enveloping her in a hug, "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, I don't know what I would do if you weren't so cool."

Alice patted him on the back, "Of course, Dustin. Now, please explain to me why you are studying your compass?"

A lightbulb flicked on in Dustin's brain, "I need your compasses. All of your compasses, right now!"

The three of them obliged, pulling out their compasses and laying them on the table in front of them. All of them indicated that they were pointing north.

"That's not true north," Dustin explained. Lucas and Mike looked at him, confused, "That's not true north," He repeated.

Dustin, clearly annoyed by the fact that his friends didn't understand what he was talking about, began explaining how compasses worked.

Alice sat on the couch, next to Eleven, who seemed extremely nervous sitting next to the stranger.

"I'd understand if you were afraid of me. I bet it took you awhile to feel comfortable around the boys," she gestured to them, "I've known these boys since they were babies and I hope we can be friends."

Eleven nodded, "Friend?" She pointed at Mike.

"Yes, I'm Mike's friend. I'm friends with all of them," she explained, patient with how little words El actually spoke.

"Who are they?" El pointed to the twins who were now playing with the toilet paper from the bathroom.

"They are my brother and sister. The boy is Tommy and the girl is Lucy."

"Tommy and Lucy," she repeated, making sure that she remembered their names.

Speaking of the twins, it was as if they felt someone talking about them, they bolted over to Alice and jumped onto the couch between the two girls. Eleven flinched violently, very startled by the twins' entrance.

"Tommy, Lucy, that was not very nice!" Alice said, her voice taking on a reprimanding tone, "Could both of you please apologize to Miss El?"

"Sorry, Miss El." The two of them said in unison.

"Can I sit on your lap?" Lucy asked Eleven. Eleven looked to Alice, as if to ask for permission to allow the small child to sit on her lap. Alice smiled and Eleven nodded at Lucy, straightening out her dress.

"Your hair is really pretty! And I like your dress! Pink is my favorite color!" Lucy said, excited to meet a new friend.

Alice and Eleven sat there with the two little ones, entertaining them while the boys made their plan.

"Well," Alice stood up, hoisting Tommy onto her hip and grabbing Lucy's hand, "I don't think I can join you all on your quest because I can't find a babysitter for the children. But, if you guys want, you can catch a ride in the Monte and I'll drop you off at the store so you can get some snacks."

"Yes, please!"

"Thank you, Alice!"

Dustin and Lucas barrelled up the stairs and out to Alice's car, while Mike stayed behind with Alice, Eleven, and the twins.

"It was very nice meeting you, El. Please keep the boys safe, okay? I trust you." Alice smiled, leading all of them out the front door and into the car.

"Trust?" Eleven tilted her head, not knowing what the word meant.

"It means," Alice thought for a moment, "I believe in you. You are my friend." Eleven smiled.

Alice dropped the four of them off at the store and made her way home, the twins in the backseat, complaining about how they didn't get a snack. The little family finally arrived at the Chouse and the twins immediately ran towards the door, excited to be back home.

"Aly," Tommy said, grabbing onto the hem of Alice's shirt, "Why wasn't Will playing with us today?" Alice faltered a bit, finally prepared to tell the twins. She called both of them into the living

room and they plopped down on the couch.

“Do you both remember when we went to Auntie Joyce’s house and all of the police were there?” The children nodded, “Well, the police were there because Will is lost and they don’t know where he is.”

“Why don’t we just call him?” Lucy said.

“We can’t just call him, sweetie. We don’t know what number to call and they have no idea where he might be.”

“I’m confused,” Tommy said, crinkling his eyebrows.

“What are you confused about, honey?” Alice asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“The police can’t find Will, but he’s been singing to us.”

Alice paused. “What do you mean “singing to you”?”

Lucy ran to the twins’ room and returned with Alice’s supercomm, “We flipped the switch back and forth really fast and then Will just started singing!” Lucy explained, flipping the channel switch back and forth between A, B, and C. The radio speaker emitted screeching white noise and the twins covered their ears.

“It gets loud like that and then Will shows up!” Tommy yelled over the noise. The loud scratching ceased and it was soon replaced by a sound that Alice never thought she would hear again.

Should I stay or should I go now? Should I stay or should I go now?

A tear began to run down Alice’s face as she was transported back to a time when everything was okay.

If I go, there will be trouble and if I stay, it will be double.

She found that she was back laying on Jonathan’s bed, with both of the Byers’ boys on either side of her.

So, you gotta let me know.

“Will the Wise, you are stronger than you know,” Alice said, doing her best to comfort the pained boy. He grabbed onto her hand and squeezed.

Oh, how she wished that she had never let him go.

Should I stay or should I go?

6. Aliens in The Village

Alice thought she was going to have a normal day. She prayed that she would get one day where it was only her and the twins and there were no crazy revelations or happenings that couldn't be truly explained. Regardless of what she had learned the night before, with the twins communicating with Will, she hoped that she was finally out of the frying pan.

Her day began normally, at least. The twins gave her hell for even attempting to wake them up early on a Saturday, so she let them sleep in.

Surprisingly, Tommy was the first child to wake up, even though he was the most vocal about wanting to sleep in. He explained that he heard "The A-Team" theme song playing on the television and he didn't want to miss out. She didn't argue and scootched over on the couch so both of them could share the television screen. Lucy joined them halfway through the episode and, by the time it actually finished, Alice had prepared their cereal bowls.

"So, kiddos, is there anything you want to do today?" Alice asked the two small children across the table from her.

"Can I color?" Lucy asked sweetly.

"I want to play with my Lincoln Logs!" Tommy exclaimed, nearly knocking his bowl of cereal off the table.

Alice smiled at both of them, "I think we can make that work."

The living room quickly transformed into shambles of clutter. Lincoln Logs were piled up nearly to the height of the twins, precariously swaying back and forth every time someone took a step. Markers, crayons, and colored pencils were strewn randomly across the floor, an obvious hazard to the Lincoln Log towers if someone were to slip.

Controlled chaos was the best way to describe it.

Lucy drew windows for Tommy's Lincoln Log cabin, which he didn't

exactly want, but he let her do it anyway. The two of them were getting along extremely well. Almost too well, Alice thought. There has to be a catch.

“Alice! The girl with the pretty dress is at the door!” Lucy screamed, peeking through the curtain. “And she has Eggos!”

Alice hadn’t gotten a message from any of the boys, so she wasn’t expecting El to come over, but she invited her in, nonetheless.

El slowly stepped into the Darrow residence, taking in all of the chaos around her. She was clutching the boxes of toaster waffles close to her chest.

“Here, sweetheart, let me put these in the freezer for you,” Alice said, taking some of the boxes from the young girls’ arms, “Is everything okay? The boys haven’t tried to contact me all day.” Alice said, trying to fit all of the boxes into the small freezer. She tossed them in and quickly closed the door, understanding that she’d get a surprise the next time she opened it.

“I need help,” El said.

Alice pointed at herself, “You need *my* help?”

El nodded, “Trust.” She said simply.

The teenager understood and immediately thought of what she could do with the twins. Normally, she would ask Joyce to watch them for a while, sometimes she would even take them to the store while Joyce was on a shift and she would let them play around. However, considering that Joyce had problems of her own to deal with, she didn’t want to bother her. Mrs. Henderson, though she cared a lot about Dustin, could not handle two kids at once, so she wasn’t an option. Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair were never home on weekends, both of them were hard-working parents and had developed a one-track mind once their kids were old enough to handle themselves. The last option was the Wheelers.

She dialed the phone number to the Wheeler’s house and patiently waited for an answer.

Karen picked up right away and answered sweetly, “Hello?”

“Hi, Mrs. Wheeler! This is Alice Darrow. I was wondering if you could watch the twins for the day? I have a lot of homework to do before Monday and I’m not going to be able to do it all and look after them.” Alice said, El watching over her.

“Of course, sweetie. Just drop them off and I’ll have them over for as long as you need.” Karen’s voice crackled through the phone speaker. The receiver clicked and Mrs. Wheeler was gone.

“You lie.” El pointed out, obviously not happy with Alice’s decision, “Friends don’t lie.”

“I did lie, but I did it so I could help you,” Alice explained, hoping El would understand that she needed to deceive Mrs. Wheeler.

The twins piled into the back seat of Alice’s Monte Carlo, clutching tightly to the toys that they decided to bring to the Wheeler home.

“Alice, what’s the pretty dress girl’s name again? I forgot.” Tommy chuckled.

The teenager peered at the two young ones in the backseat, “Her name is El, silly. You met her yesterday and you already forgot?”

“Lucy and Tommy,” El whispered, excited that she remembered their names. Alice smiled at the girl’s genuine reaction to her remembering.

Karen was thrilled to watch the twins—being such a close age to Holly, it was very easy to look after them because they all kept each other occupied.

“I really appreciate it, Mrs. Wheeler. I can’t thank you enough,” Alice said, grasping the older woman’s hand. Karen laid her other hand on top and smiled sweetly.

“You are such a sweet girl, Alice. I am happy to help. Please let me know if you need anything at all, okay?”

When people say “*it takes a village*,” Hawkins is that village.

Following Jill's departure, those close to her took over parenting the children that she left behind. Already having dealt with the death of her father, the parents of the little town of Hawkins made sure that the kids had nothing else to feel bad about.

"Goodbye, kiddos. You be good to Mrs. Wheeler, okay? I'll see you later and maybe, we'll get a happy meal?" She hugged the twins, one under each arm.

She returned to El, who was sitting patiently in the car, curiously turning every knob on the radio. "Okay, where are we going?"

El directed Alice through downtown, past the minimart that she had raided and the corner store that Joyce worked at. Alice drove by the cineplex, immediately disgusted by the vulgar words that someone had vandalized onto the "now showing" plaque. *People can be so damn rude*, she thought.

It soon became the end of the road for the Monte Carlo as Alice and El began to trek through the woods. The trees had lost their vibrant fall colors, now brown, they completely covered the forest floor in a blanket of crunchy leaves. The two of them were now traveling on the train tracks, with El, somehow, leading them to their destination, which was still unbeknownst to Alice.

"So, why did you want me to help you? Why didn't you ask the boys?" Alice asked, balancing on the train tracks as if she was on a tightrope, her arms straight out beside her.

"I was bad. Scary." El said, simply, not knowing the words to explain what truly happened.

"You were bad? Why? Were you angry? Scared?" El nodded.

"Bad."

"What happened?" Alice asked, she watched as conflict flooded El's eyes, she immediately retracted her question, "You don't have to tell me, if you don't know how."

The journey was quieter than ones that Alice had had before with the gang. El hadn't yet become fully comfortable with the teenager, and

Alice understood that. She was making strides though. El had joined Alice on the train tracks, holding onto the teenager's hand to help balance herself.

The two of them continued on their journey, Alice trusting that El would lead her to the place that she wished to go, El trusting that Alice wasn't one of the "bad guys" that she knew had been trailing her since her arrival in Hawkins.

"You know, I'm glad that you decided to come to me," Alice said, breaking the silence between them. El looked up at her, "I know what it's like to feel like you don't have anyone to go to." Alice thought back to Steve, grasping tightly to the times where he was good, wishing her mind would skip over the times where he had changed. She knew that, if he needed something, he would come to her, but she had now figured that it wouldn't work the same the other way around. She couldn't go to him with her problems or issues because he had become infatuated with, what seemed like, every other girl except her. She didn't like Steve like that, he had always been like a brother to her, but she got jealous of the other girls that he surrounded himself with, knowing that they could pull him away from Alice with a flip of their hair.

"I hurt him," El admitted, looking down at her feet, tears threatening to fall.

"Who did you hurt?" Alice asked, concerned for the boys.

"Mike?"

El shook her head.

"Dustin?"

She shook her head again.

"Lucas?"

She nodded and turned her face away from Alice. "I got scared."

Alice looked at the girl sadly, "Do you know if he's okay?"

“Alive,” El explained, “I ran.”

“The boys were probably scared too. I can understand why you would run away,” Alice said, pausing the walk and stopping to look El in the eyes, “You’re okay now. I promise.” El nodded, looking at the tracks ahead of them as she began to walk faster.

“El, can I ask you something?” Alice said, quietly. El nodded, “The twins could hear Will singing through one of the Supercomms. Do you know how they could do that?”

El smiled, “Lucy and Tommy and Will have friend.”

“What do you mean “have friend”?”

“Special,” El said, clasping her hands together as if to say “connection”.

She thought back to everything that had happened since Will’s disappearance. Her mind traveled back to the night of November 6th and the flickering light that didn’t cause a problem after that night. The morning afterward when she was transported into a nightmare land where she first saw the monster. The party at Steve’s house, Barb’s disappearance, and Alice feeling the monster’s presence in Steve’s backyard. Finally, the twins hearing Will sing through the two-way.

There was such a strong transcendental connection between her family, Will, and now, Eleven. Alice hadn’t taken the time to look back on all of the things that had been happening because she had to keep moving forward at such a fast pace that she didn’t have the time.

Alice recognized where they were now. El had taken her to the forest that surrounded the quarry, it wasn’t very far from Mirkwood. As they got closer and closer to the quarry, they heard a commotion that got louder as they continued forward. As they descended on the quarry, Alice and Eleven took in the sight before them.

Troy stood farthest away from them, holding Dustin close to him with a pocketknife to his neck. Mike stood at the edge of the quarry,

staring straight into the abyss at his feet. Troy's crony, James, was closest to them as he tried to talk Troy out of it.

Truthfully, Alice had no idea what to do. If she went for Troy or James, he'd probably seriously hurt Dustin. If she went to stop Mike, James may try to stop her, or Dustin might get seriously hurt. Maybe if she stepped in the middle and tried to talk them down--

She was too late.

A scream ripped from her throat as she watched Mike step off the edge. She bolted towards the cliff, the three other boys finally noticing her presence, but far too concerned about Mike to care.

"Holy shit," Dustin murmured as the four of them peered over the edge, entranced by the sight below them.

Mike was alive, he was levitating halfway between the edge where he stepped off and the harsh bottom of the quarry. He began flailing and quickly started to float back up to where Alice and the three boys stood.

He dropped violently onto the ground and Alice quickly ran over to him to make sure that he was not injured. She harshly grabbed his shoulder and forced him to look at her. He confirmed that he was okay and his attention sharply flicked to the enraged young girl walking, determined, towards the scene.

El knocked James to the ground as he landed with a thud. Suddenly, a loud crack sounded from Troy and he quickly grabbed his arm. El had snapped his arm, seemingly, in half. He cried in agony, shrieking from the intense pain that he was feeling.

"Go," El said simply, causing the two boys to flee the scene in fear of the girl who just snapped one of their arms with her mind.

Dustin, in a fit of new found confidence, yelled at the boys as they ran, "Yeah, that's right! You better run! She's our friend and she's crazy! You come back here and she'll kill you! You her me? She'll kill you, you sons of bitches!"

By this time, Alice had gauged that Mike was okay, physically, but

still shaken up about the fall and, subsequent, flight that he had taken so she made her way over to El. The young girl stared off into the distance, dissociating from the world around her.

“Eleven, sweetheart? Are you alright?” Alice said as El collapsed in front of her. She managed to catch the young girl on the way down and they both landed with a thud, Alice holding the young girl’s head to keep her safe.

Alice used the sleeve of her shirt to wipe away the blood that was dripping from El’s nose. Mike began to call out to Eleven, attempting to bring her back to the real world.

El slowly opened her eyes and began to sob, “Mike, I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“Sorry? What are you sorry for?” He questioned, confused by her sudden apology.

“The gate,” she began, tears creating streams down her dirty face, “I opened it.” She paused once more, taking in the weight of her own words.

“I’m the monster.”

“No, no, El. You’re not the monster. You saved me! Do you understand? You saved me.” Mike said, comforting the young girl. Alice watched the interaction in front of her proudly. The kids that she had known for so long were growing up and becoming wonderful young men. She smiled sweetly and a tear threatened to roll down her cheek.

Mike pulled El into a hug and Dustin knelt down beside them. He wrapped his arms around his two friends and looked to Alice. Knowing that the look was an invitation to join the embrace, she smirked and squeezed the three kids in front of her, their bodies melting in the warmth of the others.

Following their embrace, the four of them decided to make their way back to Mike’s house. El led the others back to where Alice’s car was and the two boys shoved their bikes in the trunk as they made their

journey back to reality. Alice quietly pulled into the driveway of the Wheeler household and subconsciously took note of the number of utility vans that were parked on the side of the street. The boys pulled their bikes out of the trunk and walked them into the garage, placing them haphazardly next to Nancy's old bike.

Dustin led El to the back of the house with the bikes so they could enter through the basement while Mike and Alice entered through the door to the garage. As Alice and Mike made their way into the house, the twins immediately spotted their mother figure.

"Hi Alice!" Tommy exclaimed, tossing his blocks aside and running towards her.

"Alice, I wasn't expecting you back this early. And with Mike?" Karen questioned, holding Holly on her hip.

"Me neither, honestly. I guess I worked faster than I thought. Mike pulled in on his bike at the same time I showed up. Total coincidence!" Alice playfully hit Mike on the shoulder.

The twins followed Alice and Mike downstairs where they met up with Eleven and Dustin. Mike pulled Eleven into the bathroom to wipe off her dirty face, which left Alice and Dustin with the twins.

"Have you heard from Lucas at all?" Alice asked, concerned about the other member of the party.

"Not since we left his house," Dustin explained, "I tried to help them fix things but he was super pissed." He shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Well, how about I try to talk to him, get him up on the Supercomm."

Dustin flicked through the channels, attempting to make contact by repeating the same message over every channel that he could reach, "This is Dustin. Lucas, do you copy?"

The room filled with static for a moment before roaring to life through the sound of incoherent yelling through the speaker on the Supercomm. Lucas was sending a distress signal.

And there they went—out of the frying pan and into the fire.

7. Teenage Fugitives: Many Worlds

Lucas' voice scratched through the small speaker on the Supercomm. He had gone out on his own to look for the gate so that Eleven didn't interfere again and it seemed, by the urgency in his voice, that he had found something. He was so far out of range that his voice crackled through the speaker, no discernable words present. Dustin and Mike yelled at him in an attempt to finally make full contact with him. Though his voice was going in and out, they were able to understand a few words in his frantic voice.

"Bad men!" He screeched, out of breath. Dustin has misheard the word as "mad hen" but Mike understood what he was saying.

"Bad men!" Mike repeated, speaking strongly in Dustin's face. Eleven sat nervously on the couch, playing with the hem of her dress. Alice sat next to her, attempting to slow her breathing as she panicked, worried about everything. "Stay here!" Mike commanded Eleven as he and Dustin ran upstairs. Alice followed behind, skipping every other step in an attempt to get up faster.

The three of them quickly ran through the upstairs hallway to the nearest window, fumbling over each other. They pulled open the curtains and observed the Hawkins Power and Light truck sitting at the corner, the driver still in his seat. They all quickly became very suspicious of the man and Mike bolted into the kitchen to ask her a question. Alice followed behind while Dustin stayed at the window to keep watch.

Karen stood at the kitchen counter, obviously very entranced in her phone call. Mike burst into the room, disinterested with his mother's phone conversation.

"Mom!" He yelled frantically, "Did you schedule any repairs?" Karen looked at him, confused by his sudden interest in the housing repairs. "Is there anyone supposed to come and do repairs on the house?"

Karen tried to understand Mike's question, but he just kept getting flustered because she didn't get it. He just needed a simple yes or no, but she kept prying into it.

“Mike! Alice!” Dustin barrelled into the kitchen nearly knocking Alice over, “We need to leave. Right now.” He said, panting. Dustin ran back out of the kitchen and Mike went to follow but was interrupted by Karen yelling his full name. He quickly turned around and told her that if anyone asked where he was to say that he’d left the country.

“Karen,” Alice said pleadingly, grabbing onto the mother’s hands, “I need you to watch the twins for a little bit longer. Don’t let anyone touch them or talk to them until I get back.” Karen called out to the young girl in confusion and disagreement as Alice made her way back to the basement, “I promise I’ll keep Mike safe. Promise me that you’ll watch over them.” Karen stood speechless, “Promise me, Karen!” Alice yelled frantically, clenching her fists.

“I promise!” Alice heard her call out before turning the corner and quickly making her way into the basement where Mike, Dustin, and El had already made their way outside. The children quickly got ready on their bikes as Alice ran into the garage through the back door, swiping Nancy’s bike from the rack on the wall, immediately mounting it, not even closing the door behind her as she sped off to meet the kids.

She stood upright, pushing with all of her might to make it up the grassy hill to reconvene with the kids. When they did meet, it seemed like she caught El in a moment of reconnection with one of the Power and Light goons. She did a double take as she recognized the man from the newspaper clippings that she had gone over with Hopper, just a few days prior. It was Martin Brenner—the head scientist from Hawkins Lab.

The three bikes quickly peddled away, dodging the vans and parked cars on the sides of the road.

“Elm and Cherry, over!” Dustin yelled as he kept in contact with Lucas who was still riding away from his own villains.

Alice pictured a map of Hawkins in her head, remembering a shortcut that she and Steve had taken many times before, “Through the Thompson’s backyard!” She took point, peddling ahead of the others, yelling at the children that were playing in the backyard. “Get out of the way!” She yelled as the two kids separated.

Finally, the three bikes crossed over the hill and finally met with Lucas, who was barreling his way down Elm. Alice sighed in relief as she saw all of the party accounted for.

“Where are they?” He breathed out, extremely out of breath from all of the biking that he was doing.

“I don’t know,” Mike answered truthfully, “I think we lost them.”

Oh, how wrong he was.

Three vans turned the corner, one after the other, rapidly flying down the residential street at extremely high speeds. The five of them peddled on, their cries of fear completely drowned out by the sounds of screeching tires and roaring engines.

They managed to keep a good distance on the vehicles behind them when, suddenly, a fourth van appeared around the corner, turning right onto the road that they were traveling down. There was nowhere else to go. They were boxed in. Alice pushed forward to take point as the van in front of them would make contact with them first. She watched as the front of the van got closer and closer and showed no signs of stopping or slowing down. She bit down on her lip to stop the fear from bubbling up from the pit of her stomach.

Then, in an act of magic that could only be described as a miracle, the van's front end crumpled and flew over the tops of the kids on their bikes. It seemed to be weightless and the world moved in slow motion as the kids watched as the vehicle flipped over the children.

“Holy shit,” Alice whispered under her breath, turning back to make sure that the children were still okay. Everyone was intact and so they peddled on.

They didn’t believe that they were truly safe until they made it to the junkyard without any interruption.

Eleven dismounted Mike’s bicycle and immediately plopped onto the ground, obviously drained from the impressive use of her power. The boys circled around her, making frantic conversation about the events that they just witnessed. Alice, on the other hand,

automatically going into protection mode, found a high vantage point to check their perimeters. She and Steve would come to the junkyard all the time to hide from their parents, so getting a vantage point as a first move was just a habit at this point.

She climbed on top of the old school bus and shielded her eyes from the unforgiving sun. The perimeters were clear. She could see the rural interstate road from where she was standing, but there were no vans in sight.

She hopped down from the school bus and landed on her feet with a thud, the sound muted from the brown grass below her.

Lucas began making a diagram using items he found around the junkyard. He explained how there was a fence that went all around Hawkins Lab and, no matter where he was on it, the compass pointing towards the building. He described the *Power and Light* vans that surrounded the place.

“Department of Energy? What do you think that means?” Dustin asked, trying to figure out who owned Hawkins Lab.

“It means government. Military.” Mike explained, though Dustin didn’t quite believe him, “Just trust me, alright? It’s military. My dad’s told me before.”

“Mike’s right. There were soldiers out front,” Lucas pointed out from his travels. Dustin, still obviously confused about how the Department of Energy was related to the military, asked if they made lightbulbs.

“No, weapons!” Mike exclaimed, “To fight the Russians and commies and stuff.”

“Think about it as a front,” Alice tried her best to explain. “The government is using the “Department of Energy” as a recognizable name so people don't think to question what Hawkins Lab is actually doing.”

“Which is probably making weapons,” Lucas said. The four of them followed Lucas’ gaze as he looked at Eleven, quietly insinuating that

she was the weapon that they were creating.

“This is bad. This is so very bad,” Dustin whined, realizing that they are in possession of a government weapon and that the government was trying to get it back.

“We can’t go home,” Mike said seriously, “We’re fugitives now.”

The conversation was cut short when the five of them heard the whirr of a helicopter overhead. Panicking, Alice yelled at the kids to hide the bikes under the school bus, giving the helicopter no reason to think that they were there.

Alice looked around, scanning the area for something that she could use to protect the kids if the government goons ended up coming to the junkyard. Her eyes quickly landed on an axe that was stuck into the windshield of an old junker car. She bolted over to grab it and ran into the school bus where the kids were already hiding.

“Put your heads down! No movement near the windows!” Alice yelled, crouching to make sure that she would still have a view through the front window, while anyone looking in wouldn’t see anything.

The helicopter sound receded, making the children believe that they were safe for the moment. However, no one dared to move a muscle for fear of alerting someone on the outside.

The four kids slowly became more comfortable inside of the bus as they moved to sit in a circle with each other. Alice sat with her back to the circle, attempting to sharpen her axe by grinding it against one of the legs of the driver seat.

Above them, the helicopter still circled, obviously tipped off by movement that the kids didn’t know they were making. The uncomfortable silence was soon interrupted by the voice of Nancy Wheeler screeching over the speaker of Mike’s Supercomm.

“Mike, it’s me, Nancy. Are you there?” Mike immediately jumped up to grab the radio as the rest of the kids enveloped him, trying to hear Nancy’s message. Alice still took point, watching for any movement

on their perimeter.

Nancy's voice continued to play through the speaker as the kids contemplated whether or not to believe her. Dustin pointed out how weird it was for Nancy to be attempting to contact them while Lucas grabbed for the Supercomm. Mike quickly pulled it away and told him not to answer, even though it was his sister that was attempting to establish communication.

"It's like Lando Calrissian," Dutsin pointed out the similarity between their situation and a plot line in *The Empire Strikes Back* where Lando Calrissian betrayed Han Solo, "Don't answer."

Nancy's voice was soon replaced by that of Chief Hopper's. Alice doubled back and moved to fit into the circle around Mike.

"Listen, kid, this is the chief. If you're there, pick up. I know that you have Alice with you so pass the radio to her." Alice quickly grabbed the radio out of Mike's hand. She stared at it for a moment, listening to Hopper's message. "Alice, we know about the girl," she could feel Eleven tense up beside her so she grabbed her hand to calm her down. Hopper paused for a moment and she could hear him sigh.

"We have movie night on Thursday, Alice. How about we watch *Grease*?"

Alice let out a breath of relief and nearly allowed a tear to fall. The kids in the bus looked at her like she was insane, but she didn't care.

"Actually, I'd prefer to watch something else," Alice answered, "Maybe *Junkyard Dogs*?"

"Okay, I'll see you then, over and out." Hopper said, understanding the very simple message that Alice slipped in.

Dustin began to overthink everything that had just happened. He paced the length of the school bus, ranting about how it was all a trap and that the bad men were coming to get them. The other boys tried to talk him down, but it was no use. Once Dustin believed something, it was very hard to get him to not believe it.

They argued a little longer until they heard vehicles pulling into the

junkyard. The kids attempted to go to the front windshield to see for themselves but Alice held them back.

“Sit your asses back down and stay there!” She ordered, the kids taken aback by her sudden outburst. They obeyed nonetheless, scared of seeing what would happen to them if they didn’t.

Alice clutched the handle of the axe, crouching down beside the first seat and holding the weapon above her head like a baseball bat. She watched as one man’s head bobbed near the window that she was looking out of, ducking farther behind the seat when she saw that he had a gun. She was ready to attack when she heard the door open but quickly recoiled when she heard punches being thrown that were not coming from her or the boys.

Fear was quickly replaced with relief as Hopper stepped onto the school bus. “Alright, let’s go,” he said, though no one answered, “Let’s go!” He said more forcefully.

Alice stopped at the door and looked at Hopper with pleading eyes, “Can I bring the axe?”

The grown man looked down at the girl’s new found weapon and sighed, “Just don’t hurt yourself.”

Alice hopped off the steps to the bus and bounded away from the man. The five of them piled into Hopper’s truck and made the quiet journey to the Byers’ home. The four children were still unsure of how to feel about the situation until they finally made it to their destination.

Greetings were short as everyone involved wanted to get straight to business. Quickly, the boys began to explain the Upside Down to the adults, using the same example that Mr. Clark and Alice had used only a few days prior.

Joyce and Nancy asked Eleven whether or not she would be able to contact Will and Barbara through the Upside Down. She nodded and the group rapidly set up a station for her to be able to contact them.

Pictures of Will and Barbara were strewn across the table and Alice

set up the Supercomm to where it would expel the static that El needed.

Eleven closed her eyes as the rest of the group surrounded the table, staring intently at the girl sitting at the head of it. The lamp above the table flickered once and soon the static became faint. Eleven opened her eyes and looked at them sadly.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"What's wrong? What happened?" She asked frantically, holding tightly to Jonathan's hand.

"I can't find them," her voice breaking.

The group continued to sit around the table, attempting to figure out why Eleven wasn't able to make contact with the missing Will and Barbara. The party explained that Eleven's powers were finite—if she used too much too fast, she would become drained.

"Since she had flipped the van earlier, it seems like she is still drained and maybe that's why she couldn't find them," Alice explained.

Their conversation was soon interrupted by Eleven making her way out of the hallway and into the kitchen. Everyone turned their attention to her.

"The bath," she said simply, "I can find them. In the bath."

The group finally realized that "the bath" that Eleven was referring to was a sensory deprivation tank. Using their coaxing skills, Alice and Dustin managed to get all of the information they needed to create one from Mr. Clarke. The group made the decision to travel to the high school to begin their search for materials to create their vessel required for El's interdimensional romp.

Alice led Joyce and Eleven through the hallways of Hawkins Middle, trying her best to remember the way to Mr. Clarke's science classroom. She recognized the diagram on the wall and jiggled the door handle—It was locked. Luckily, Alice and Steve had broken into the middle school a few times when they were younger and knew the trick on how to open the doors.

"Joyce," she said, "Hold the handle down."

The older woman obliged and watched as Alice took a step away from the door before bringing her foot up beside the handle and kicking it in.

"I'm not even going to ask how you know how to do that," Joyce said, chuckling as they made their way into the classroom.

Eleven took a seat in one of the desks while Alice and Joyce searched through the cabinets for goggles and duct tape to create a make-shift blindfold for the young girl's bath.

Alice took a second to breathe in the memories from Mr. Clarke's room. She ran her fingers across the desk that she sat in five years prior, front of the class, answering every question, graciously correcting Mr. Clarke's mistakes, and sneakily sliding her paper to the edge of her desk so Steve could cheat off of her. It was the only class he ever got an A in.

She found out that her dad had passed away while she sat in this classroom. The principal, himself, pulled Alice out of class to deliver the news. Her mother didn't want to do it, so he was given the dirty job of telling her.

Her world crashed down in the hallway outside of her seventh grade science classroom.

The kids inside heard her wailing but Mr. Clarke tried his best to go on with teaching. He couldn't bear it, so he stopped class and went outside to comfort Alice. The principal watched his class while he stayed in the hallway, consoling the broken child.

"Alice, honey," Joyce said, breaking Alice from her trip down memory lane, "Do you know where he keeps his goggles?"

Alice smirked and walked directly to the cabinet on the wall that held the safety goggles. They hadn't been replaced since Alice had gone to school there. It was quite evident by the way the straps were all tattered from years of frequent use. Alice picked out the least worn ones from the cabinet and tossed them to Joyce.

“Think fast!” She joked as Joyce fumbled to catch the goggles. In her attempt, she dropped the tape roll that she had been holding. Eleven and Alice giggled at Joyce’s exaggerated flub. Alice and Joyce began to wrap the front of the goggles with duct tape, occasionally holding them up to the fluorescent lights above to make sure no light peeked through.

“That should keep it dark for you,” Joyce said, handing the goggles to Eleven, “Just like in your bathtub.” The older woman paused and looked to Alice who was watching Eleven intently. The poor girl was terrified.

“You’re a very brave girl,” Joyce said, attempting to boost El’s confidence, “You know that, don’t you?” Eleven looked at Alice and the older girl nodded softly as if to agree with what Joyce had said. “Everything you’re doing for my boy, for Will, for my family. Thank you.”

Alice smiled and gently grabbed Eleven’s hand.

“Listen,” Alice began, “Joyce and I are going to be there with you the whole time and, if it ever gets too scary in that place, you just let us know. Trust that we will keep you completely safe, okay?” Eleven, hearing the word she recognized, immediately felt safe with the two of them.

“I trust,” she nodded, squeezing Alice’s hand.

“Ready?”

Eleven breath trembled, “Ready,” she repeated.

The rest of the group had been working diligently to create the sensory deprivation tank in the Hawkins Middle School gymnasium. Salt had been taken from the pool and hoses trailed from the back room of the gym to make sure the temperature was exactly right. It took a few tries to get everything correct. The egg that Dustin was using to test how buoyant the water made something sank a few times before the group got it to float. The boys set up one of the supercomms and set it so that radio static echoed throughout the entire gym.

Finally, it was ready.

Eleven removed her socks and Mike's watch before putting the goggles on and entering the kiddie pool.

Alice grabbed onto Eleven's hand and helped her into the pool. As she stepped in, Alice was splashed with some of the water. However, due to the fact that the droplets were room temperature, she didn't react whatsoever.

The group sat around the pool like it was a dinner table. The eight of them watched intently as Eleven began to float. It was quite a sight to see, really. Alice noted how peaceful she looked, even though she knew that she would be traversing into a mental hellscape. Alice remembered how Eleven had described the place to her. It was eerily similar to one of the first nightmares she had when Will first went missing. She couldn't imagine going back to that place so, for Eleven to do it willingly, it was a very heroic thing for her to do.

Alice sat behind Eleven's head, between Hopper and Joyce, all three of whom were ready to bring the young girl back to reality in a moment's notice.

Eleven had settled into the water and the electricity in the gym surged, causing the lights to flicker and then completely shut off. The group looked up, all of them still dumbfounded by the power Eleven could exude.

For a few moments, it was quiet. The only sound anyone could hear was the sound of each other's breathing.

"Barbara?" Eleven hushed. Everyone's head snapped to Nancy who stared straight ahead at Eleven.

The girl in the pool began to breathe heavily, and the electricity in the gym pulsed on and off once more.

"What's going on?" Nancy asked frantically. No one could answer her question. Is Barb okay? Is she okay?" She began to shout at Eleven.

Eleven began breathing sharply repeating the word "gone". Nancy recoiled into Jonathan and began to softly cry, her hand clasped over

her mouth. Tears welled up in Alice's eyes.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Eleven got louder and louder, repeating the word over and over again, thrashing in water, desperately looking for something to ground herself. Her screams echoed through the empty gymnasium.

Alice and Joyce jumped into action. Alice took Eleven's hand and grasped it firmly to let her know that she was there. "It's okay." Joyce kept repeating, the two of them trying their hardest to console her and put her back on track.

"We're right here, honey," Joyce spoke deliberately.

"We got you," Alice said, squeezing her hand, trying to hold back tears. They were putting the girl through torture. She could only imagine what she had seen to make her react so strongly. She was just a little girl, for Christ's sake.

"We got you," Alice repeated until Eleven calmed down again. She stopped thrashing and took a deep breath. Alice attempted to let go of her hand, but Eleven held tight. She was safe.

"Castle Byers," Eleven said quietly. Jonathan and Joyce exchanged looks of, what Alice could only describe as a mix of hope and terror. Given what happened when Barbara was discovered, she couldn't blame them for their fear.

"Will?" She whispered. Joyce gasped and Jonathan leaned in closer to the pool.

"Tell him I'm coming," Joyce ordered, "Tell him that Mom is coming."

"Hurry," Will's small voice rang over the supercomm. A sound that Alice hadn't heard in a long time. A feeling that Alice hadn't had in a long time. There was hope. The sound was soon replaced with whimpers coming from Eleven.

She violently sat up and pulled herself to the edge of the pool. The group lurched back, startled by her sudden movement.

Joyce pulled Eleven into an embrace from behind and kept stroking her head, “You did so good. I’m so proud of you,” she praised, tears threatening to fall. Eleven still held tightly onto Alice’s hand. She began to stroke the small girl’s hand with her thumb and she began to cry.

Eleven was wrapped in a towel and sat with the boys on the bleachers. She leaned her head on Mike’s shoulder and stared blankly in front of her, allowing herself to rest. Lucas rubbed her shoulder in an attempt to comfort her and Dustin sat next to Mike, playing with Alice’s axe, twisting it into the bleacher seat.

“Dustin, I swear to God, if you get your blood on my axe—”

“I won’t!” He raised his hands in defense, causing the axe to fall over with a smack. Alice gave him a joking death glare as she walked away to go talk to Jonathan.

“Nancy and I have a plan,” He began.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Hannibal. Slow it down. Your mom said to stay here,” She explained, repeating his mother’s wishes.

“I know, but you have to listen to me. Mom and Hopper are going in there like bait! Nancy and I have a trap that we can set up to lure that thing away from them while they go get Will,” He went over the plan that he and Nancy had come up with and Alice thought about it.

“Jonny, I need you to answer me honestly,” she puts a hand on his shoulder, “Do you think you can do that without getting hurt?”

A pang of guilt flashed in Jonathan’s eyes but he remained strong. He looked Alice in the eyes and spoke simply, “I do.”

She frowned slightly but caught herself, “Okay,” she pulled him into a hug, “Please come back in one piece. I don’t want to have to give the twins your train set,” she chuckled.

The twins.

Alice’s face dropped. In all of the chaos of the last 24 hours, she completely neglected to think about the twins. They must be so

scared. Oh God, they're only six years old. They don't understand why Alice had to leave—They probably think that she just left! Just like dad... just like mom.

"If they're anything like you, Al, they'll be just fine," Jonathan explained, "They know that you wouldn't leave them on purpose."

"I guess you're right," She said, not fully believing what he said, but obliging so he could leave the conversation to carry on his and Nancy's plan.

She watched as Jonathan and Nancy snuck out of the middle school, trying not to startle the kids who were still sitting on the bleachers.

Even in the darkest of times, it still baffled Alice to see how easily those kids could make everything seem okay.

8. This Way Comes

Alice's dad, Thomas, worked part-time at a family farm outside of Hawkins. He had another job in town on weekdays after Alice went to school, was a part of the Hawkins volunteer fire department, and helped on the farm every weekend.

The farm had massive silos, each of them about 80 feet tall, the tallest things that you'd find outside of a major city, filled nearly to the brim with crops of all sorts. Soybeans, corn, alfalfa, just about anything you thought grew in Indiana, you could find on the farm. They didn't have cows or pigs or anything like that, only crops.

It was a freak accident, really. Thomas was a beneficial worker. He would always go above and beyond what the typical day on the farm entailed. He never expected extra payments because of his hard work; he believed that it was his duty to give help when help whenever anyone needed it. So, one Friday, he decided to go into work for a few hours at the farm because Alice's birthday was coming up and he wanted extra money to spend on presents. One of the farmhands asked him to clean up the spillage around the silos that had just been filled and put away equipment while he ran into town but, it was a given that Thomas would find other things to do before he went home.

It wasn't until the farmhand came back and saw that Thomas' car was still out front and a tractor was still running that he figured something was wrong. Upon further inspection, the farmhand found that a ten-foot ladder, that was used to access that first permanent rung on the side of the silos, was still pitched up against the side like someone had used it to ascend the silo. The farmhand called out for Thomas, but no answer came.

The farmhand quickly fetched the owner of the farm, and he went up the silo to see if everything was okay. He found the breather bags removed and tied to the top of the silo and the hatch still open. Inside the hatch, there he was. Thomas lay face-down, motionless, completely engulfed in the crops.

No one knows how he fell in or what he was doing up there, but Thomas' death was the talk of Hawkins for weeks following the accident—much to

Alice's chagrin. But, it was a small town, she couldn't blame them. Nothing ever happens in Hawkins.

Nothing ever happens in Hawkins.

"Alice!" Dustin yelled, bringing her attention back to the situation at hand. She looked around and grounded herself; She was in the gym at the middle school with the boys and Eleven, Nancy and Jonathan were at the Byers' home, Joyce and Hopper went to get Will, and the twins were, hopefully, with Karen. "We're going to the cafeteria to find the chocolate pudding!"

"Okay! I'll be over there in a second!" Alice called back, turning to the bleachers to get the axe that Dustin had stuck into the wooden bench. The wood creaked and groaned as she pulled on it, tilting it back and forth to wiggle the head of the axe out of the bleacher.

She followed the boys and Eleven across the parking lot to the cafeteria where Dustin and Lucas immediately ran into the kitchen to search for their treasure. Alice noticed Mike and Eleven sitting together at one of the lunch tables, and decided to leave them alone.

"You guys find it yet?" Alice asked, twirling the head of the axe on the linoleum floor. The boys were rummaging through every one of the refrigerators in the kitchen when finally—

"Jackpot!" Lucas exclaimed, grabbing as much pudding as he could and plopping it on one of the tables.

"I knew she was hoarding it!" Dustin yelled, attempting to grab even more than Lucas and adding it to their stockpile.

"Damn, I knew she was bad, but I didn't think she was this bad," Alice said, cracking open one of the cans of pudding. She threw her head back and downed the small can in one go. The boys looked on in bewilderment.

"She's perfect," Dustin gushed as Lucas slammed one back as well, coughing as if he had just polished off a bottle of hard liquor.

"It's the nectar of the gods," Lucas joked, laying on top of the pudding, hugging it tightly.

Lights travelled through the windows to signal a car pulling up to the school, Mike, believing that Nancy and Jonathan had returned, quickly made his way outside to welcome them.

Like toy soldiers, one after another, cars and trucks full of people armed to the teeth filed into the parking lot and inside the gymnasium where the group just was.

It wasn't Nancy. It was the bad men. And they found them.

Mike frantically ran back inside of the school, alerting the rest of the group that something was wrong. "Guys, guys! They found us," he yelled.

Alice heard heavy footsteps gaining on them and quietly cried out as she and the group ran out of the cafeteria, "They're sweeping for us. Oh God, they'll be everywhere!"

"How did they find us?" Lucas asked.

Mike looked back at him as they all ran, " I don't know, but they knew that we were in the gym."

"Lando," Dustin said simply, but it wasn't clear to Alice who he believed betrayed them.

Flashlights shone through the glass doors in front of them. The group turned on their heels as soon as they got caught in the beam of light. "Go, go, go!" They yelled, turning down every hallway they could to try and lose the bad men.

The footsteps thundered through the halls and screeched to a stop every so often as another group of bad men began to gain on them. Alice led them, axe at the ready in case any of their foes got too close for her liking. Alice had never killed anything before and she did her best to talk herself up as they navigated the maze of halls.

They turned a corner and halted as a blonde lady in a trench coat stood in the hallway, holding her gun up to them. The suited men behind her did as she did, and soon all of them were looking into the barrels of the guns. Alice stood at the head of the group, face-to-face with trench coat lady, staring down the evil people in front of her.

Her hand gripped tightly around the handle of the axe as she brought it above her waist, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

Eleven gently put her hand on the axe handle and lowered it. She stepped in front of Alice, leaning towards the bad men in front of her. Their flashlights began to flicker, quicker and quicker, but their stances held firm.

What is she doing? Alice asked herself but soon saw Eleven's intentions.

As if from a horror movie, blood began to leak from every orifice and drip down their faces. They remained motionless, El silently melting their brains from the inside. Alice and the boys looked on in terror as their lifeless bodies dropped to the floor. Eleven folded in front of them, her chest barely rising and falling.

Mike rushed to Eleven, shaking her, attempting to wake her up, but to no avail. He called out her name, but there was no answer.

Alice kneeled beside Eleven and held her finger to the young girl's nose, "She's barely breathing. We have to get somewhere safe, those goons are still around here, and we have no chance of getting out of here alive without her." The boys nodded and prepared to move Eleven into one of the classrooms. However, before Alice could lift her, she heard footsteps moving down the corridor towards them. It was no use. The bad men finally caught them.

"Leave her," a voice bellowed from one of the men. The boys stood up and barked insults at the men in front of them only to be caught in the arms of the adversaries who had come up behind them.

Alice turned around to look at the man who spoke. Her breath hitched in her throat as she saw who it was.

"You," she spit, "You're Dr. Brenner."

"My reputation precedes me. Now, back away from the child," He ordered, stepping closer.

"Go to Hell!" she screamed, using her body as a shield to protect Eleven.

Brenner kneeled in front of her, and Alice raised her axe to his chin, "You get any closer, and I'll split your skull in two." Brenner chuckled at the girl's persistence.

"She's my child. She's sick, but I'm going to make her better," he explained.

"Papa?" Eleven croaked, craning her neck to look at the man from which Alice was blocking her. She didn't reach for him and, when she saw that it was *indeed* Papa, she recoiled and leaned into Alice.

Brenner looked past Alice and, before she could react, buff arms wrapped around her torso and lifted her away from Eleven. Her axe dropped in front of her with a thud. She kicked and squirmed, screaming for the man to let her go but he wouldn't.

Dr. Brenner cradled Eleven in his arms, trying to convince her that she wasn't well and that he was going to take her back home so she could get better. Eleven looked to Mike instead, wanting to stay with her friends rather than go back to the bad place.

"Bad," she repeated as she looked Brenner in the eyes. She called out to Mike, and the electricity began to pulsate once again. The boys stopped dead in their tracks.

"Blood," Mike said simply, staring straight ahead, eyes fixating on the bloodied bodies splattering on the floor.

The wall in front of them started to crack and bend like smashed glass. It almost looked like it was breathing. Small chunks of the wall flaked off and fell to the floor. Then, the head of the monster pushed through the wall, screeching and gurgling. The children recoiled, finally facing the monster head-on.

Demogorgon.

The men holding them let them go and fumbled for their guns, trying in any way to impede the monster from coming closer. Gunshots rang out like firecrackers and bullets riddled the beast and the wall behind it.

Alice used the chaos to slide the axe to Dustin and grab Eleven. She

carried her on her hip, like she would Tommy or Lucy, and ran through the halls of the middle school with Lucas, Dustin, and Mike leading. They pushed past the bad men and tried their best to get as far away as they could from the monster. They soon familiarised themselves and found that they were in the seventh-grade area.

“Mr. Clarke’s room is unlocked, go!” Alice yelled as she cradled Eleven’s head.

The four of them ran as fast as they could, barreling into the classroom and quickly closing the door. The lights continued to flicker as Alice made her way to the back of the classroom and gently laid Eleven on one of the lab stations. Eleven groaned and Mike rushed to her side to comfort her.

Dustin returned the axe to Alice and stepped to the back of the room, attempting to keep as much space as possible between him and the door, Lucas followed suit.

Alice watched intently as Mike began to tell hopeful things to Eleven, about how she would go home with him, she could have all the Eggos she could ever want, they could go to the snowball together. It almost made her cry. They were just kids.

“Promise?” Eleven cried.

“Promise,” Mike assured her.

The touching moment came screeching to halt as they were interrupted by the shrieking of the monster getting closer and closer. Alice stepped in front of Eleven and pushed Mike and the boys behind her. She grasped tightly to her axe, holding it like a baseball bat.

Truthfully, Alice was terrified. Like, who in their right mind would be prepared to fight a faceless interdimensional monster who runs around killing people when it smells blood? But, she would do anything to protect her kids. So here she stood, axe in hand, scared to death, ready to do whatever it took to keep them safe.

The gunfire that had been creating a symphony of pops and cracks

stopped suddenly, “Is it dead?” Dustin sputtered. The door was thrown open, and the monster pounced through the threshold. It was here, and there is no escaping it now. Alice tightened her grip on the axe like it was her lifeline and stood her ground against the beast.

The boys fumbled behind her to try and grab the wrist rocket, but she couldn’t stand still any longer. It had to end now.

Alice raised the axe above her head, let out a scream, and sent the axe crashing down in front of her. The axe lodged itself in the chest of the monster, and it let out a deafening screech. Alice quickly pulled the axe from the monster and stumbled back due to the force it took. The monster acted as if it didn’t feel a thing and slinked closer. The acrid smell of the decaying monster filled her nostrils; she could feel its breath on her face.

Alice went in for another swing, this time landing it in the arm of the monster. She thought that, maybe, if she swung hard enough, the force could take its arm off. Oh, how wrong she was. The monster was irate, screeching and shrieking so high pitched that Alice wanted to cover her ears.

Suddenly, the monster’s arm swept Alice in the torso and threw her against the wall. She didn’t even have time to scream.

“Alice!” The boys screamed. They squirmed at the sound of her head hitting the cabinets and then bouncing off the floor. Her body lay limp on the ground; they thought she was dead.

For a moment, Alice did too.

After the impact, she couldn’t move. Not because she was physically impeded but because she couldn’t even *think* about moving. A fog rolled in inside of her brain, and she couldn’t perceive anything. She attempted to open her eyes; however, when she did, her vision was spotty. She couldn’t understand what she was seeing. The flickering lights made it even worse. Her hearing went in and out as she struggled to focus.

Regaining some of her strength, she used her axe to hoist herself off the ground, using it as support as she stood. She felt someone grab

her bicep and help move her from where she was on the side of the room, "Alice, come on. Get back," she heard Lucas' voice faintly.

Her eyes barely opened, her vision was like looking through a broken window, as she saw Eleven step closer to the monster.

"Eleven," she said, her voice hoarse, "What are you doing?" She now had to lean on Lucas to stand up. He did his best to help her regain her balance.

Eleven turned back and looked at her and the boys. She made eye contact with Mike and said her goodbye. Then slowly turned her eyes to Alice, who was now trying to move closer to get to the young girl. Lucas and Dustin held her back, showing more self-control than ever before.

"*Trust me*," Eleven said simply before turning back around to face the monster that was pinned up against the wall. Alice stopped fighting the boys and slumped back against the counter.

"I trust you," She said quietly.

The world spun. The lights pulsed faster as Eleven reached her hand out to the monster and screamed. The monster squirmed and screeched like it was being tortured. Eleven was exhausted from before, clearly giving everything she could to rid the world of the monster.

It was a blur. Both Eleven and the monster began to dematerialise in front of their eyes. Dusty particulates of both of them fluttered around the room. The light caught them, making it look like a snow storm.

When the dust cleared and the lights calmed down, it was revealed that both Eleven and the monster were gone, leaving nothing but a pile of ash and a hole in the wall.

Mike stood up and called out for Eleven, retracing every step they took since they came inside to see if Eleven and the monster had just gone somewhere else in the school. Whether from fear of what he would do or fear of speaking it into reality, no one in the group had

the heart to tell him that she was probably gone for good.

Alice regained her balance and finally managed to walk, using the axe as a cane, without relying on Lucas or Dustin. They traversed the school, stepping over dead bodies, nearly slipping in puddles of blood. The four of them were far too numb to the sight to even worry about it at that moment.

“Alice,” Dustin slowed down to walk next to her, “You’re bleeding really bad.” He pointed to her neck and chest. Alice reached up, cringing as she felt the warm liquid. She looked down at her bloody fingertips and noticed that the collar of her shirt had three distinct slash marks where the monster had attacked her. She wiped the blood on her pants and carried on ahead.

“I’ll be okay, Dusty.”

They finally made their way outside and plopped down on the steps of the cafeteria entrance. They all leaned on one another, afraid to let go for fear of one of them suddenly disappearing. Again.

Mike cried quietly into Alice’s shoulder, his small voice cursing the universe over the loss of his love. Lucas and Dustin sniffled softly, attempting to hold in their emotions.

It wasn’t long before ambulances and police cars rushed to the scene. Alice was still completely disoriented from the impact but made her way to an ambulance so they could check out her wounds. The paramedic noted the three deep parallel cuts leading from her chest to her cheek and quickly cleaned them to make sure they didn’t get infected. She winced in pain as he wiped the area around the gash with a cleaning solution. She waited in the back of the ambulance as the paramedic dressed her wounds and gave her a blanket.

In the distance, she heard two small but mighty voices calling out her name.

“Aly! Aly!” Lucy and Tommy shrieked as they ran around trying to find Alice.

She quickly dropped the blanket and ran towards them, “I’m right

here,” she enveloped them in a hug, “I’m right here. It’s okay. I’m here now.”

Alice was still a bit cloudy as she sat on one of the beds in the emergency room. They had finally finished stitching the wounds on her chest as someone stitched up her head. Truth be told, she didn’t feel it much. She didn’t know if that was from the delirium or maybe something was really wrong with her but, nevertheless, she was thankful. Steve sat next to her, Tommy hanging on his leg.

Once the doctor was done stitching her up, Steve and Alice were finally safe to talk about what happened.

“You are so stupid, you know that, right?” Steve said, playfully punching Alice in the shoulder.

“You’re one to talk,” Alice retorted, jokingly rubbing the spot where he hit her.

“Me? You were the one that got thrown into a wall by the damn thing,” Steve said incredulously.

The two of them looked at each other for a moment, breathing in the weight of all of the things they were telling one another. Steve felt the tension and immediately returned to the veil of humor. He looked down at her chest, pointing out the bandage leading all the way up to her face. Alice scoffed, “It’s not like I asked it to. Besides, I got a few good hits in.” She said, referring to the axe that she lodged in its chest.

“I did too, bunny.” He told her about the nail bat that Jonathan made. He used it at the Byers’ house and, according to him, he “roughed it up a bit”. Jonathan told her earlier that, without Steve there, he and Nancy probably wouldn’t have made it out. But that was no excuse not to make fun of him. It was in her blood!

Lucy had fallen asleep on Alice’s lap and began to snore quietly. Tommy, on the other hand, made his way over to the nurse’s station to find himself a girlfriend.

Alice couldn’t articulate how relieved she was when she saw the kids

running towards her at the school. At that point, she didn't know if Nancy, Jonathan, Will, Joyce, or Hopper were alive and then the kids came barreling towards her like some reminder that they'll always be there.

Steve and Alice spoke about "normal" things once the doctor came back to wrap up her stitches. The gauze around her head, Tommy said, made her look like a mummy. Tommy nagged, wanting to be a mummy just like Alice. She ultimately asked a nurse if she could wrap up his head too and the nurse obliged.

Just as Tommy was getting mummified, Karen walked through the emergency room, obviously looking for Alice. That was what Alice had been dreading all night.

"Hi, Karen," Alice said shyly, afraid of the outburst that Karen might have. Mrs. Wheeler didn't yell very often, but Alice believed that her actions definitely warranted a scream or two. Steve felt the tension and quickly left the scene to go watch Tommy.

Karen quietly sat down on the hospital bed next to Alice, sighing at the young girl in front of her. She looked down at Lucy and gently brushed her hair out of her face.

"I should be angry at you right now. You left with Mike and Dustin and didn't make any contact with me for 18 hours. You just left the twins. The government came to my house and questioned us for hours and I couldn't say anything because I had no clue what was happening. I should be fuming, Alice," she paused, making eye contact with Alice, "But I can't be."

"I'm so sorry. I wish I could tell you what happened," Alice admitted. Hopper had made it very clear that no one except the group was to know about the events that went down.

"I know and that's why I can't be mad. You kept your promise," she looked at the wounds peppering the young girl's body and sighed, "Mike told me that you got hurt protecting them."

To avoid giving up any information, Alice just nodded and looked down at the sleeping child in her lap.

"Thank you," Karen said simply before walking away, passing Hopper as he made his way down the hallway. He had talked to her right as she got to the hospital, but he hadn't had time to really sit down and discuss the events of the past few days.

"Hey, kiddo," He said, leaning up against the wall, "What did they say about the," he gestured to the bandages on her chest and head.

"Some areas of the cuts were deeper than others, so they didn't have to stitch along the whole length. They said that they lost count around 60," she explained.

"Counting them'll have to be one of the twins' jobs then," Hopper chuckled, his face quickly dropping as he remembered the situation that they had just experienced.

"I'm sorry," he said, his stoic demeanor unraveling, "You shouldn't have had to go through that." Alice's eyes softened, trailing over the face of the man she looked up to.

"It's not your fault," she whispered, upset that he would let that thought enter his mind, "You couldn't have known what was going to happen. Even if you did, you know I would still be with you the whole step of the way."

Her breath hitched in her throat as she thought about Eleven, "Those kids are my family, Hop. So are you. There's nothing I wouldn't do to keep you all safe." He pulled her shoulder into his chest, gently rubbing her arm.

"I know, kiddo, I know," he said, kissing the top of her head.

Their conversation was interrupted as Mike, Dustin, and Lucas bounded toward them, their feet hardly touching the ground.

"He's awake!" They erupted into a cacophony as they descended on the injured teen.

The boys helped Alice into a wheelchair after checking with a nurse to see if it was okay to move her. Lucas pushed the teen through the halls as the other two ran ahead, dragging the twins with them, much to the chagrin of the hospital staff. Alice laughed, her face lighting up

as Lucas nearly tipped her over while going around a sharp corner. They all skidded to a stop as they reached the door that Jonathan was standing in front of.

“You guys have to be gentle with him, okay?” Jonathan explained. The boys nodded, slightly diminishing the energy they had.

They filed into the room, their giddy excitement reminiscent of Christmas morning. Their cheerful faces warmed the steely, cold hospital room, bringing up the atmosphere of the room.

The boys rambled on about the adventure that they had embarked on over the last few days, filling their friend in on everything, as if they had never missed a beat.

It didn’t go back to normal that quickly for some.

For a few weeks after the loss of El and the incidents of Will’s disappearance, Alice had trouble sleeping, her mind wandering and latching onto the horrific events that she had been through. She felt weak as the boys seemed to bounce back pretty quickly. That was the beauty of being a kid, she thought, they bounce back much easier than grown people do.

Something clicked in Alice’s mind, however, on the night of Christmas Eve as she sat around the Christmas tree with the twins. Joyce had an excessive amount of holiday lights left over after her experience with them and decided to pass some on to Alice to use for her decorations that year.

It had been a tradition that the twins got to open up one present on Christmas Eve, something that had occurred since Alice was a young girl. Alice continued the tradition with the twins, knowing just how much more excited it would make them when they woke up and saw all of the gifts that Santa had delivered them. The “night before” gifts always came from Alice though, never Santa, as these were the most meaningful ones.

“Okay, okay, you can open them now!” Alice cheered with almost as much excitement as the children.

Lucy and Tommy frantically tore at the colorful wrapping paper, taking no time to find an edge and make it easier on themselves.

Lucy got her present open first, the tell-tale yellow fur of a stuffed animal poking out of her wrapping. She mangled the paper to reveal a brand new Funshine Bear Care Bear plush. It almost brought her little self to tears, joy pouring out of her in the form of high-pitched screeching.

Tommy quickly followed suit as he uncovered his Love-A-Lot Care Bear plush with the signature pink fur with hearts emblazoned on the belly.

“You said you couldn’t get them!” Tommy yelled, jumping up and down with his bear in his arms.

“Well, that was nothing a little Christmas magic couldn’t fix!” Alice smiled brightly.

She and Johnathan had driven up to the closest shopping mall and waited in line for two and a half hours to get them. Christmas magic included a lot of gas money and the loss of a good chunk of hair from Johnathan’s head—moms on a mission are brutal.

“Thank you, thank you!” Lucy screamed, tackling Alice to give her a hug, plowing her over in the meantime. Tommy followed suit, pouncing on top of her while yelling “monkey pile!”.

The three of them giggled profusely as Alice picked the twins up and began to carry them to their bedroom. She set them down as she crossed into the room, watching as they scurried into their beds, trying to fall asleep as fast as they could so that Santa could deliver his presents.

Alice turned on the small night light, then crossed to the other side of the room to plug in the Christmas lights that she had strung across the ceiling. Joyce had a *lot* of excess Christmas lights.

She went over to Lucy’s bed, the small girl already shutting her eyes tightly in hopes of a quick sleep. “Goodnight, Lucy,” Alice said, kissing her on the forehead then turning to Tommy.

“Aren’t you going to say goodnight to Funshine Bear?” Lucy asked quietly.

Alice chuckled softly, turning back and giving the soft bear a kiss and whispering goodnight.

Tommy, on the other side of the room, was already nearly asleep, very quickly giving into the night’s persuasion. She kissed him on the forehead, bringing his blanket up to his chin, making sure to also tuck in Love-A-Lot Bear. “Goodnight, Tommy and goodnight, Love-A-Lot Bear.”

“Goodnight, mama.” Tommy whispered, overtaken by sleep.

Alice nearly gasped, but she had to compose herself until she left the room. She softly closed the door, releasing her breath once she heard the knob click.

It was as if all of the tension she had been feeling since everything went wrong just disappeared in an instant. Like hearing a baby’s first words, joy rushed through her body. He said mama. She was their mama.

She felt the need to go spend a million dollars on Christmas gifts to show how much she loved them, but after hearing that, she figured that they knew.

Quietly sprinting to the phone, she dialed the number she knew so well.

“Hello?” Steve’s voice crackled over the receiver.

“Steve, I’m going to cry,” she said, worrying the man with how little context she gave.

“What’s up? Do you need help setting up presents?” She chuckled softly, touched by the fact that he was so willing to help her, even without asking.

“Happy tears. Giddy, ecstatic, amazingly happy tears.” She paused before dropping the bombshell.

“Oh, thank God,” he sighed, “I was *not* willing to get out of bed. Well, what happened?” He said, leaning against the wall next to the phone.

“Tommy called me mama,” she said, joyous tears brimming in her eyes.

Alice heard Steve gasp, “Holy shit, Al!” He exclaimed, the thumps on the ground from his happy jumping travelling through the phone, “That’s so awesome! I can’t believe it! I’m coming over right now.” She chuckled quietly, not believing him until the disconnect tone rang out through the phone.

Steve showed up without a shirt on, his bare chest covered in goosebumps as he traversed through the snow. Alice tried to meet him outside with a blanket to cover his exposed torso, but she was quickly enveloped in his arms before she could deliver it.

He hoisted her up, his physical strength showing in the ease of the liftoff, spinning her around as he giggled excitedly. He gently set her back down, her feet meeting the snowy ground with a quiet crunch.

“You could have at least put on a Santa hat, in case the kids woke up,” she chuckled, finally wrapping the blanket around his shoulders, beckoning him into the warm house.

“I didn’t really have time to think, Als,” he paused, “It was kind of a last minute decision.”

She lightly punched his shoulder, chuckling at his impulsiveness, “Now that you’re here, I could actually use some help with the presents.”

She retrieved the gifts from their hiding spot on a shelf at the top of her closet as Steve made hot cocoa for the two of them, finally wearing a shirt of his that Alice had found in her closet.

Alice tuned the radio to the local station that was in the 22nd hour of their “48 Hours of Christmas Music” special that they did every year. The two of them made quick work, with Alice finishing up some of the wrapping and Steve writing the tags so that the twins couldn’t recognize the handwriting. Santa, apparently, wrote with the

handwriting of a 4th grader, but the kids never noticed.

When they had finished, the presents were laid out under the tree so that it looked like a Christmas card. Lucy and Tommy always got the same amount of gifts as each other, but each year that gift number changed, depending on how much money Alice had saved up or how many other toys local families gifted to them. This year, the Wheelers, Sinclairs, and Hendersons all were able to donate some of their kids' old toys and Alice was always thankful for their help.

Steve and Alice sat on the couch, watching the light snowfall out the window.

They were safe now. There were no more monsters in Hawkins. The children of Hawkins were finally able to sleep soundly knowing that they would be okay, at least for one night. A simple thing, but one that so many people yearned for.

Alice rested her head on Steve's shoulder, holding tightly to her mug of cocoa for warmth.

"We're okay, bunny," Steve said, his voice barely above a whisper, "Now let's go to bed before the twins wake up and find us out here."